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The UNESCO COURIER

GREAT EPICS

HEROIC TALES OF MAN AND SUPERMAN

THIS MONTH'S INTERVIEW

JEAN-CLAUDE CARRIÈRE

encounters

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the great Portuguese voyages of discovery marked the start of a far-reaching process of dialogue between continents and civilizations. In the words of historian Luis Filipe Barreto, ''The Portuguese practised the intermingling of cultures and peoples...purveyed commodities and syncretized religions and customs. .... The Portuguese discoveries thus made a fundamental contribution to the transition from an age of tightly-knit societies to a wider, more open world.'' (See the *Unesco Courier,* April 1989.) Right, a 17th-century Persian miniature depicting a Portuguese.

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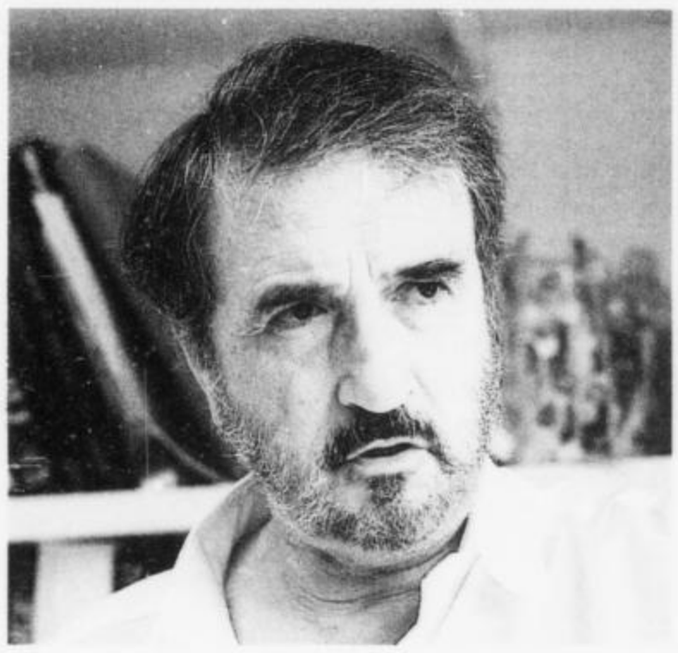

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Cover: Dobrynia Nikitich, a legendary hero of Russian folk epics, fights the dragon. This miniature by P. Parilov appeared in a collection of epics published in Moscow in 1938.

Back cover: Narada at the court of the demon king Ravana. An 18th-century illustration of an episode from the *Ramayana*, the great Sanskrit epic poem of India which recounts the heroic deeds of prince Rama. The poem is thought to have been composed by Valmiki around the beginning of the Christian era.

The Editors wish to thank Ms. Nahal Tadjadod for her help in the preparation of this issue.

The French author Jean-Claude Carrière is an internationally known dramatist and screenwriter who has produced over fifty screenplays, notably for Luis Buñuel and Andrzej Wajda. Some years ago he adapted for the stage the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. Here he talks about this remarkable project which took over a decade to complete.

Jean-Claude Carrière

The *Mahabharata*, the Great History of Mankind

How do you set about making a work like the* Mahabharata *accessible to a European or an American?

Over the past two or three centuries the West has succeeded in bringing large numbers of Japanese, Africans, Patagonians to a sympathetic understanding of Shakespeare, Mozart and Picasso. There is no reason why the reverse should not be possible, that Westerners in turn should not become attuned to the Shakespeares, the Mozarts and the Picassos of other cultures. There are, however, a number of barriers between cultures which are particularly difficult to surmount because they are invisible.

Take Europe for example. People are still immured within a cultural fortress. For years other cultures have been kept at bay. It wasn't until the beginning of the twentieth century that some avant-garde artists began to break down these walls.

Before then, from the eighteenth century onwards, there had been a handful of solitary pioneers who had set out in search of other worlds. It is astonishing to think that the *Bhagavadgita*, the most famous text in all the East, was not translated into English and French until the end of the eighteenth century, just a few years before the French Revolution...

Internal resistance, especially religious resistance, was fierce. In the fifteenth century, the monk Luis de León was imprisoned for five years for translating *The Song of Solomon* into Spanish, despite the fact that it was a part of the Bible. Bringing into Europe texts foreign to Christian culture was an act of heroism which could be undertaken only by people of exceptional stature.

As for the *Mahabharata*, it remained unknown in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century. To translate the *Mahabharata* was, it should be noted, a very considerable undertaking. The epic is fifteen times as long as the Bible. The poor fellow who embarked on the first French translation worked at the task for twenty-five years, on a subscription basis. At first he had 200 subscribers, but their number was gradually diminished by death. Nevertheless, he continued with his work, alone and without reward, finally dying at his task. Someone else took up the burden, but he too died. The epic has never been completely translated into French. The only complete translation in a non-Indian language is an English translation made by Indians and completed in about 1900. In the 1930s, some Americans in Chicago embarked upon a new translation, but were obliged to abandon it uncompleted.

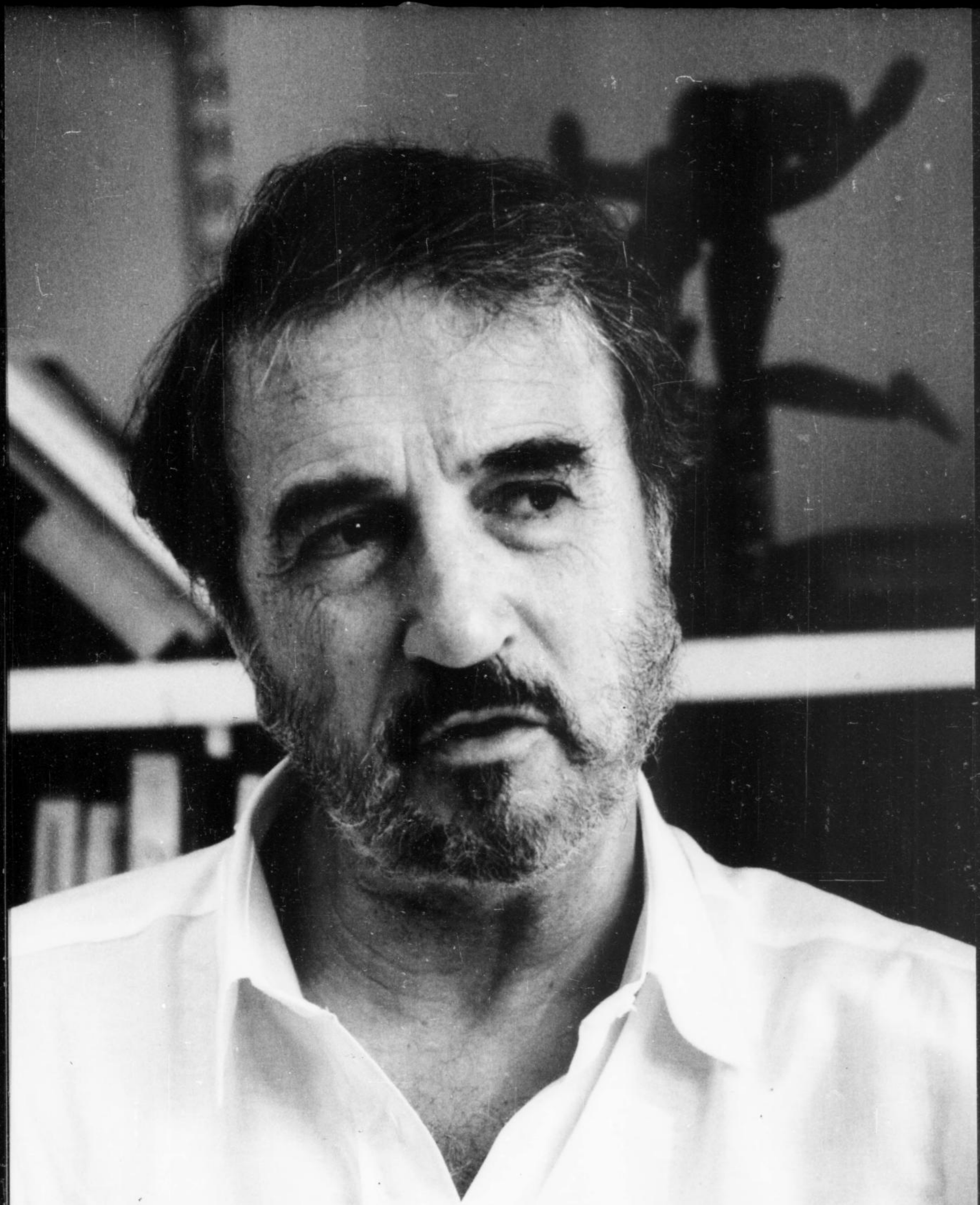
Amazingly, until 1985, the general public in Europe still knew nothing of the *Mahabharata*.

1985 was the year of the first theatrical performance, directed by Peter Brook, of your adaptation of the epic.

Yes. The play, *The Mahabharata*, was performed that year at the Avignon festival for the first time. Lasting nine hours, it was performed either in sections on three different evenings, or, occasionally, which the actors preferred, in a single performance lasting all day or all night. The company consisted of twenty-five actors and included sixteen different nationalities.

For three years, the show, in French or in English, was performed to packed and appreciative houses all over the world. We soon realized that, in addition to the charm of the story, Peter Brook's inspired directing and the talent of the actors, some profound element in this tale from afar touched a chord in a totally unprepared Western public in a direct and lasting manner.

Was it the unmistakable sense of impending doom hanging over the world? Was it the unwavering search for the true meaning of doing what was right? Was it the subtle, sometimes savage, game of dice with destiny? Was it, perhaps, that comic-pathetic vision of characters who forget their divine origin to face up to what the Greeks of the same epoch called "problemata"—those questions and conflicts of daily life in the resolution of which myth gives way to tragedy?



In Sanskrit *Maha* means "great", or "total". *Bharata* is, first, the name of a legendary sage, second, the name of a family or clan. Thus the title of the epic can be understood as "Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty". But *Bharata* can also, by extension, mean "Hindu", or, more generally, "Man". Thus the story is no more and no less than "The Great History of Mankind".

In fact, the central narrative of this "great epic of the world" concerns the long, ferocious struggle between two related families, the five Pandava brothers, and the Kauravas, who number one hundred. This family quarrel, which arises and intensifies regarding dominion over the world, culminates in a titanic battle in which the fate of the entire world is at stake.

The arrival of Queen Gandhari. This photo and those on pages 7 to 9 show scenes from the stage version of the ***Mahabharata*** *(Paris, 1985) adapted by Jean-Claude Carrière and directed by Peter Brook.*

Opposite page, the five Pandava brothers.

How did you summon up the courage to take on such an immense task? Did you start by reading the text and, if so, did you read it in English or in Sanskrit?

It all came about through a mixture of accident and design. The accident was a chance meeting with an expert in Sanskrit, Philippe Lavastine, who today is nearly eighty years old. He invited Peter Brook and me to his home one evening and began to talk about the *Mahabharata* in his own genial, lively manner.

We knew virtually nothing about the subject, our knowledge being limited to a reading of the *Bhagavadgita* made all the more superficial in that we had read it as an individual document apart from the *Mahabharata,* of which it is fully a part. As we sat facing Lavastine, Peter asked him: "Who is this Arjuna who is mentioned in the *Bhagavadgita,* and why does he go to pieces before Krishna talks to him?" "I shall have to tell you about Arjuna," Lavastine replied, "but telling you about Arjuna, well..." It took him several months.

Once or twice a week we would spend a marvellous evening with Lavastine during which he would recount the epic to us. Later, I went back to see him on my own and began taking notes. Like the Greek bards of old, Lavastine was an exceptionally gifted storyteller. He spoke, he gesticulated, he laughed, he became the poem.

After four or five months, I was beginning to have a picture of the work as a whole and to grasp its extraordinary complexity, its multiple levels of meaning, in which respect it can only be compared to the works of Shakespeare. It ranges from the heights of mystic speculation to irresistible farce. The whole gamut of human emotion and thought is there portrayed like a rich bouquet.

The effort needed to enter into the mysteries of the *Mahabharata* is commensurate with its complexity. Anyone approaching it by reading, without preparation, is likely to put it aside after the first twenty pages. We were lucky that we came to it not by reading but through the agency of a storyteller.

Then came the time when you really had to get down to work...

Within a year I had written a first draft play based on the *Mahabharata,* even before getting down to reading it. I was well aware that this play would never be performed, but it enabled me, as it were, to harvest the results of my initial labours. I wanted to see if it was possible to make an adaptation for the theatre while keeping to the formula of the epic poem, that of a narration by a storyteller. It was still no more than a narrative not yet prepared for the

theatre, but at least it gave me a time scale and I knew that the whole story of the *Mahabharata* could be contained within a performance time of between five and ten hours. From this point on, Peter and I knew that we wanted to "do" the *Mahabharata.* We had committed ourselves.

The preparatory stage spread over a period of eleven years, from 1974 to 1985. We continued working on other things, for the theatre and the cinema, but for both of us the *Mahabharata* had become a travelling companion, whether we were together or apart.

We began the "big read" in 1980. I had a photocopy of the French translation and Peter had one of the Indian version in English. Each of us started reading individually, but whenever we had a chance of seeing each other, we exchanged views and shared our joys.

It takes a year to read the *Mahabharata* in its entirety, but as we were doing other things at the same time, it took us somewhat longer. The epic took over our lives. We had constantly before us this huge white whale, this Moby Dick, this bright vision; and as we went along, we discovered extraordinary things that even Lavastine had not told us about.

Then, in 1982, we said to ourselves: "Now is the time for us to do a joint read-through." It took us six or seven months, reading together every day in company with Marie-Hélène Estienne who was collaborating with us. Comparing the two versions, French and English, we eliminated all the passages that we felt we could do without (about a third of the text) and we reread the remainder making a detailed comparison of the translations. Whenever a problem arose, we consulted an expert in Sanskrit and went back to the original text.

By August 1982, we had completed our joint reading and we had a rough idea of what we wanted to include—not in theatrical terms, but in terms of content. We also knew, for example, that we would telescope the events of the three tourneys that figure in the *Mahabharata* into one. Similarly, where the epic recounts two episodes of exile in the forest, only one would feature in the play. The first elements of the theatrical version were beginning to take shape.

At this stage we felt well enough prepared to go to India. We knew the characters and we could discuss the work with the Indians on the basis of an almost equal level of background knowledge. Starting in 1982, we made a series of enthralling trips to India to examine all the ways in which the *Mahabharata* is staged there—in the various dancing schools and among certain tribes, according to the traditional Teyyam, Kathakali and Yaksagana dance-drama forms. We spent a long time working with various troupes. What we were trying to assess was the presence of the epic in the life of India today and the precise level of energy required by each sequence.

What exactly do you mean by that?

India taught us, above all, that a certain dose of vitality, of necessary energy, has to be put into a show. Not too much, not too little, just the amount required so that it never becomes solemn or didactic but remains a lively, lived experience. The great lesson we learned from India can be summed up in two words: "respectful familiarity".

In addition, we wanted to integrate into our vision all the images of India, from the maharajahs' palaces to the shanty towns. I made one trip, accompanied by Peter and

Chloe Obolensky, with the sole aim of visiting one cloth-seller after another. Strange as this may seem, the warp and weft, the very texture of a piece of cloth, can help an author to write more truly—or more concisely.

During these trips, did you remain merely a spectator absorbing impressions?

No, I also began writing. First, however, I made lists of words that I forbade myself to use. Words are never innocent. They exercise their own tyranny and a writer has to be very aware of this when adapting a text from another culture.

One has to beware of words which violate, which betray the text because they are too culturally loaded, because they exert their own exclusivity, because they erase certain ideas and images and conjure up others. I could not, for example, use such words as "knight", "sword", or "sin", or, for more subtle reasons, "silhouette" or "unhorsed".

Take the word "unconscious". If I had used this word I would have been perpetrating an imperceptible, but absolute, irreparable betrayal. In Hinduism and Buddhism there is a perfectly understood and defined meaning of "unconscious" which has not the remotest connection with the Freudian sense of the word, with its sexual connotations, as it is understood today in the West. In India it is known that a human being thinks without knowing that he is thinking and that his consciousness is more widely extended, in all directions, than his thought.

This concept is rendered in Sanskrit by an expression which might be translated as something like "the secret movements of the Atman", Atman meaning "soul", "vital breath", or "innermost essence". Obviously one cannot put a phrase like that baldly in a play, any more than one can translate it by "unconscious". I searched high and low for an equivalent, which I eventually found in the works of the great African writer Hampâté Bâ.

Reading his novel *Wangrin's Strange Destiny,* I found two very simple words placed side by side: "deep" and "heart". Juxtaposed, they seemed to me to form a magical phrase and I used it three or four times in the play. It goes very well, as when Krishna says to Bhishma: "Do you not feel it, in your deep heart...?" Imagine how it would have come across if Krishna had said: "Do you not feel it, in your unconscious...?"

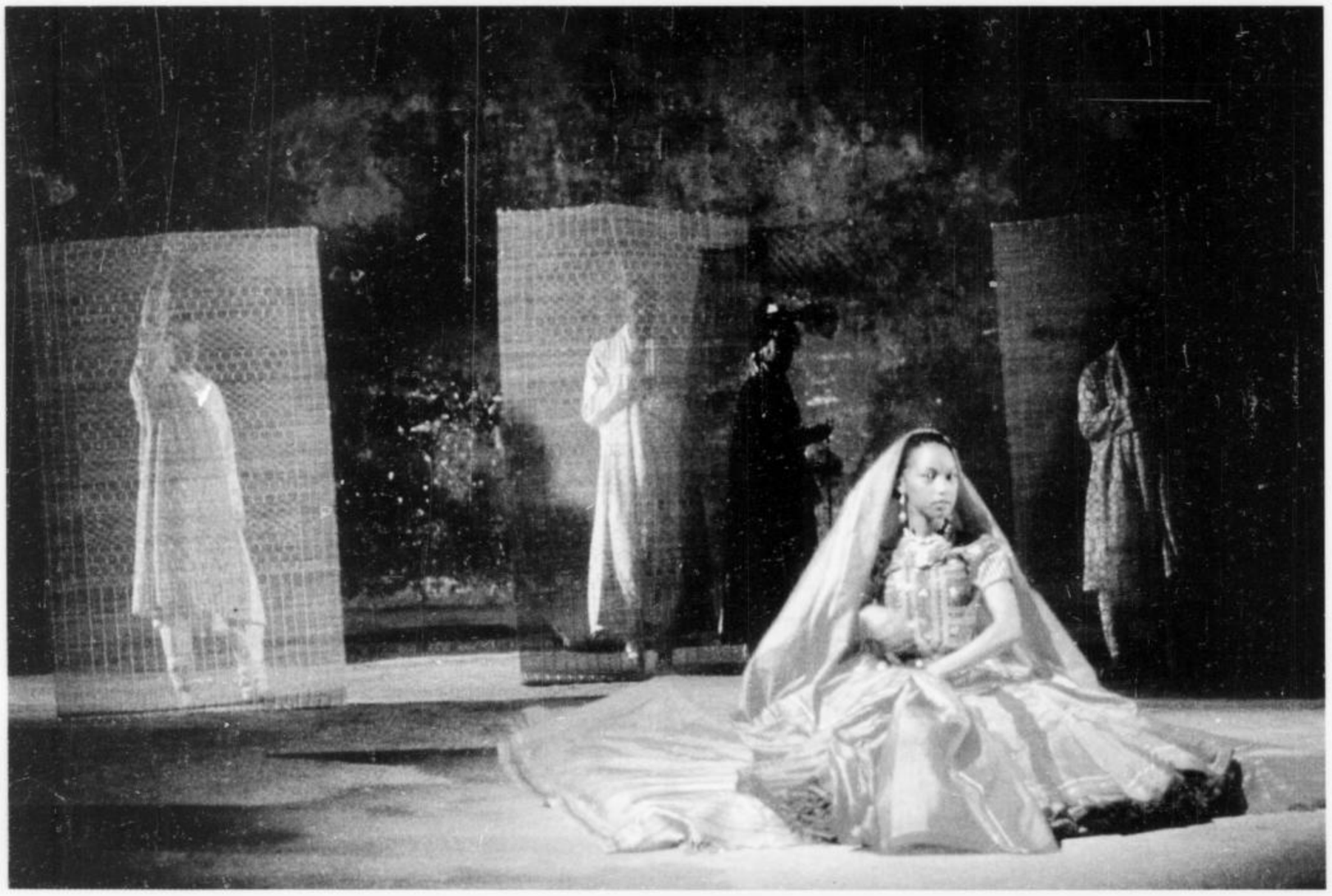
Later, when reading *La potière jalouse (The Jealous Potter's Wife),* by Claude Lévi-Strauss, I found the same image of the "deep heart" in a translation from an Amerindian text. Did he discover it directly, or did he get it, like me, from Hampâté Bâ? I was much moved to come across it and to ponder on the beauty of such a linguistic voyage.

You had to eliminate certain words outright from your vocabulary. Were there other words that, on the contrary, you made greater use of?

Yes, simple, accessible words which travel across

Opposite page, Arjuna and the son of King Virata go to war.

The princesses' night of love.



cultures without difficulty. Wide-ranging words like "blood", which means the red liquid flowing in our veins, the link of kinship, or quality (we refer to a thoroughbred horse as a blood-horse); the word "heart", which means the organ that circulates the blood, but also courage (as in the phrase "take heart") or sincerity (as in heartfelt); the words "life" and "death". All these are inoffensive, unaggressive words which have their place in texts which pass readily from one culture to another.

While keeping the original names of the characters, I elected to eliminate most Sanskrit words and to find equivalents. However, I made a few exceptions. I kept the word "Dharma", for instance, because it is central to the whole theme. After all, it was to "inscribe Dharma in the hearts of men" that Vyasa wrote his epic. The concept of Dharma is of ancient Indian invention. Dharma is the law which governs the order of the world. It is also the secret, personal law of behaviour that each one of us carries within and which must be obeyed. The Dharma of each individual, if respected, is the guarantee of the cosmic order. If the Dharma is protected, it in turn protects; but if it is destroyed, it destroys.

This reciprocity between the singular and the multiple, between the particular and the general, is peculiar to and lies at the very heart of Indian thought, as expressed in the poem; a reciprocity which today, as in the past, evokes many echoes.

Was it your purpose, in choosing these key words, to mark out the space within which two cultures could sing in harmony with each other, and the one within the other?

Absolutely. I was marking out a territory.

Would you say that the series of trips you made to India helped you to rediscover the truth of the **Mahabharata** ***because it was there that it was created?***

I would say the "truths" of the work, or at least some of its truths. There is no "single" authentic interpretation of the *Mahabharata.* Ask a Hindu holy man from the south and a marxist professor from Calcutta about it and you will get different replies, both of them interesting. We do not claim, finally, to have given "the" truth of the work, simply one version among many—our version, in the West, in the 1980s.

Nor do I think that we should limit ourselves to commentaries on the work, interesting as they may be. As the French specialist on Indo-European mythologies Georges Dumézil said: "...the essential thing is that it should be beautiful." In our view, this vast epic, unfolding with the subtle majesty of a river of inexhaustible riches, defies all analysis, whether structural, thematic, historical or psychological. Doors are continually opening, which lead on to other doors. The *Mahabharata* cannot be held in the hollow of one's hand. There are many ramifications. Sometimes seemingly contradictory, they succeed each other and intertwine,

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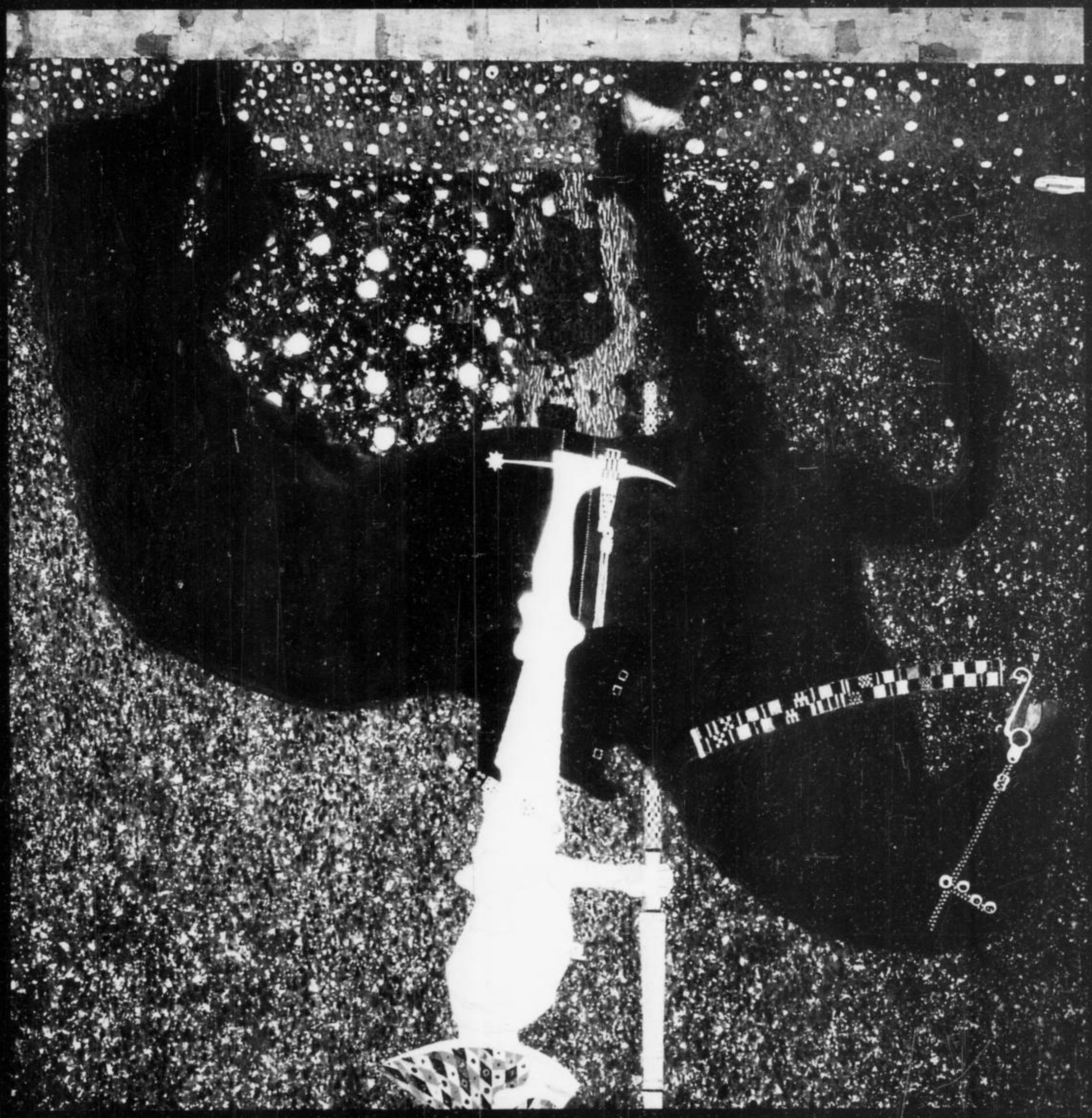


EDITORIAL

WHETHER composed by unknown poets, transmitted orally and reshaped from century to century, or written by a single known author, epics relate to the birth of a culture, the early days of a nation or an empire, sometimes even to the creation of the universe. Their setting is often an age when human beings first began to exist outside the realm of the gods. Their heroes are denizens of a zone midway between the temporal and the eternal.

These heroes may no longer be immortal, but they are superhuman. They no longer claim to be omnipotent; they are fallible, they are capable of hesitation, failure, love, hate and suffering. But they are endowed with exceptional qualities of determination, intelligence and energy with which to face their destiny, overcome adversity, and change the order of things. They are both explorers of the known world and founders of new cities.

Because of these qualities, epic heroes have always been a central part of the shared experience of traditional societies, which they have furnished with psychological models, ethical, aesthetic and religious values, and personal examples for everyone to reflect on. Larger than life, freed from some of the constraints that weighed on their fellows, epic heroes have been a source of inspiration for many, capturing their imagination and lifting them above life's tribulations and disappointments.

In village, town and city, bards, poets, storytellers, strolling minstrels and griots sang of the exploits of these legendary heroes, relieving the monotony of everyday life, keeping alive the community spirit, and maintaining from generation to generation the continuity of the national memory.

The epic has thus survived the vicissitudes of history. But in the last few decades many barriers to communication have disappeared from the world scene; the image has overtaken the written word; the storytellers of old have been replaced by television; the mass media have presented to a world audience individualistic heroes who seek a destiny in which the traditional and the sacred have no part. How has the epic reacted to this shock?

As a factor of social cohesion in traditional communities, it slowly lost ground. On the other hand, it took on a new lease of life and reached a far wider audience as the theatre, the cinema and television seized on the opportunity to adapt versions of ancient legends and transpose their themes to different periods and settings. An increasingly wide public made the astonishing discovery that there were affinities between the world's great epics. Spectators in places as far apart as Avignon or Caracas felt an immediate rapport with the heroes of Persian or Zulu epics and saw similarities between epic figures which transcended time and place.

They thus discovered a truth which, although very ancient, is only now being fully revealed: that the dreams of our past are rooted in kinship, not antagonism, and that they express, in an infinite variety of contexts and languages, fears of the same mysteries and hopes for the same joys.

The Golden Knight (1903), by the Viennese painter Gustav Klimt (1862-1918).

The itinerant poet pays his annual visit to an Egyptian village, with memorable consequences...

The poet's tale

BY MAHMOUD HUSSEIN

WE were waiting impatiently for the return of summer, for the rains to stop, for school to liberate us from its constraints. Our families would then let us run around the village streets from daybreak until long after sunset, without supervision or rebuke—unless one of us got hurt in a fight or an accident.

Summer also meant harvest time, and harvest time meant weddings. All those who lived off the land, from the smallest farmer to the wealthiest landowner, were waiting for the harvest to be gathered in and sold. This was virtually the only time of the year when the peasants had any money and could go to town and buy, each according to his means, a trousseau for the future bride. Only with her trousseau would a girl be ready to leave her father's home for that of her husband.

For the children—at a time when radio was rare and television unknown—weddings meant that troupes of musicians and actors would be coming to the village. Above all they meant the arrival of a visitor that we awaited with joyful anticipation for weeks in advance—the poet.

The poet usually officiated at the "night of the henna"—the eve of the wedding, when the hands and feet of the bride were painted with henna. The musicians would play all the next afternoon during the presentation of the trousseau

An Egyptian village storyteller accompanies himself on a stringed instrument, the ***rabab****.*

Two episodes from the ***Hilaliyya****. Above, one of the heroes of the epic, El Zeinati Khalifa (left).*

And then the theatre troupe would follow in the evening, associating the whole village with the joy of the families which had just been linked by marriage.

We thrilled to every instant of the festivities. We loved the familiar music, unchanged since pharaonic times; and we split our sides laughing at the twists and turns of these comedies whose plots turned on conjugal infidelity and just punishment of the guilty. But for us the highlight of the entertainment, the moment of jubilation, was when the poet came on.

We talked about him in the singular, as if there was only one poet, but actually he was never alone. He had one or more partners, who accompanied him on the viol or joined him in reciting some couplets in time to a rhythm.

The arrival of the poet

The poet usually turned up during the afternoon. A few local dignitaries and nearly all the children would be waiting for him by the roadside at the entrance to the village. The former would greet him with words of welcome, the latter with cheering and clapping. Then, amidst cries of joy, as if he were the future husband, he would be escorted to the home of the host family.

There the poet was hidden from our sight. But news of him constantly filtered out from inside the house via a few well-informed friends who were either members of the host family or the kind of pushy children who go everywhere even if they haven't been invited.

The reports were intermittent or continuous, depending on the impudence of the informers...right now the poet is drinking syrup or coffee...now he's taking a nap to set him up for the long evening ahead...now he's having his supper...he's tuning his instruments.

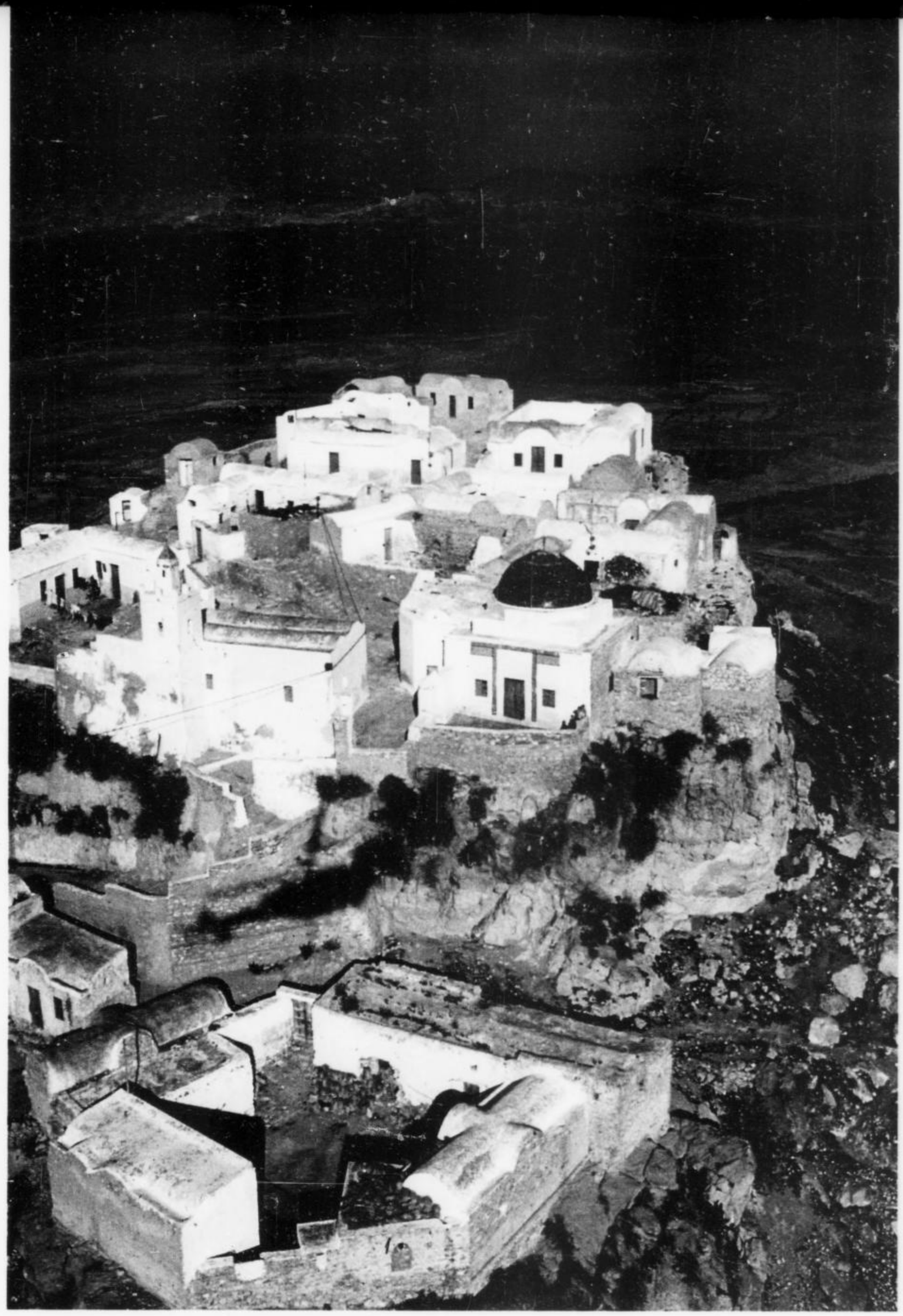
We seized upon this precious information and discussed its every detail. Every snippet was a sign that the long-awaited moment was drawing closer—or getting further away—when the poet would at long last take the stage.

A moment increasingly rare and precious since more and more families were hesitating to invite the poet...and the minute that one family finally did so we felt an unspoken anxiety spread through the village and increase until the day of the poet's arrival.

We also noted that special arrangements were made in preparation for the evening entertainment; that meetings were held to try somehow or other to divide up the space reserved for the audience between the people of our village and guests from villages nearby; that the local police were ready for action; that many guests from the surrounding countryside, especially the young ones, were armed with clubs and obstinately refused to hand them over, in spite of the objections of the village dignitaries and elders.

Only gradually did we connect the tension which reigned among the adults, and the precautionary measures they took, with the later events which upset all their calculations and put paid to their plans to keep events under control.

The performance took place in the village square, where a platform was set up for the poet and his troupe. Mats had been placed around the platform for the guests—with the exception of the



The village of Takruna, near Zaghwan in Tunisia, the "Ifriquia" that features in the epic poem of the Banou Hilal.

omdah and the dignitaries, for whom seats of honour were reserved, specially placed at points where their occupants could leave the square at the first sign of danger.

The poet appeared on the platform shortly after the evening prayer, giving the guests time to make their way to the square after performing their religious duty. We children took our places long before, as soon as the lighting of the street lamps made the evening air shimmer magically. We crowded as close to the platform as we could, never giving a thought to what was causing so much concern to those around us.

We greeted the poet with cries of joy, attentive to his slightest change of expression. We noticed the proud smiles which our warm welcome brought to his features; and we even caught the silent questioning glance which from time to time betrayed his feelings as he glanced round the square, as if to detect the places where danger might be lurking.

Whoever he was, whatever his age, the poet always told the story of Abou Zeid El Hilali—even though there are many other popular heroes in the Arab and Egyptian repertoire, such as Seif Ibn Yazan, Zir Salem, and Ali El Zeibaq. But the epic of Abou Zeid El Hilali, the *Hilaliyya*, was invariably chosen by the poet.

The *Hilaliyya* is the incident-packed epic poem of the Banou Hilal tribe, one of those which left the Arabian peninsula in the aftermath of the conquests sparked off by the successors of

the Prophet, and moved north, east and west to build what would become the Muslim world.

The poet (whichever one he was) never began the story at the beginning, just as he never reached the end. We would leave the square without ever learning where the Hilalian advance ended. The poet (always) opened and closed his narrative somewhere in "Ifriquia",* at the site of a city whose people were determined to hold out against the conquering tribe, whatever the cost.

He related, in his own fashion, some of the episodes of the confrontation between the besieged city and its assailants. The narrative was punctuated by musical interludes in which the heroes of the two sides spoke out in turn. Opposing Abou Zeid was the chief of the surrounded tribe, El Zeinati Khalifa. But there were countless other characters, and anyone listening to the tale for the first time had a hard time keeping up with it.

Many romances blossomed between the girls of one camp and the warriors of the other, complicating the issues of a struggle in which the audience's preferences gradually became inextricably confused. The poet skilfully divided his emotional flights between the two opposing sides. Whenever he praised the courage of one side, he went on to recount a new episode which glorified the other. And when a Banou Hilal woman declared her love for a Banou Khalifa man, the poet immediately described the passion of a Banou Khalifa woman for a Banou Hilal man.

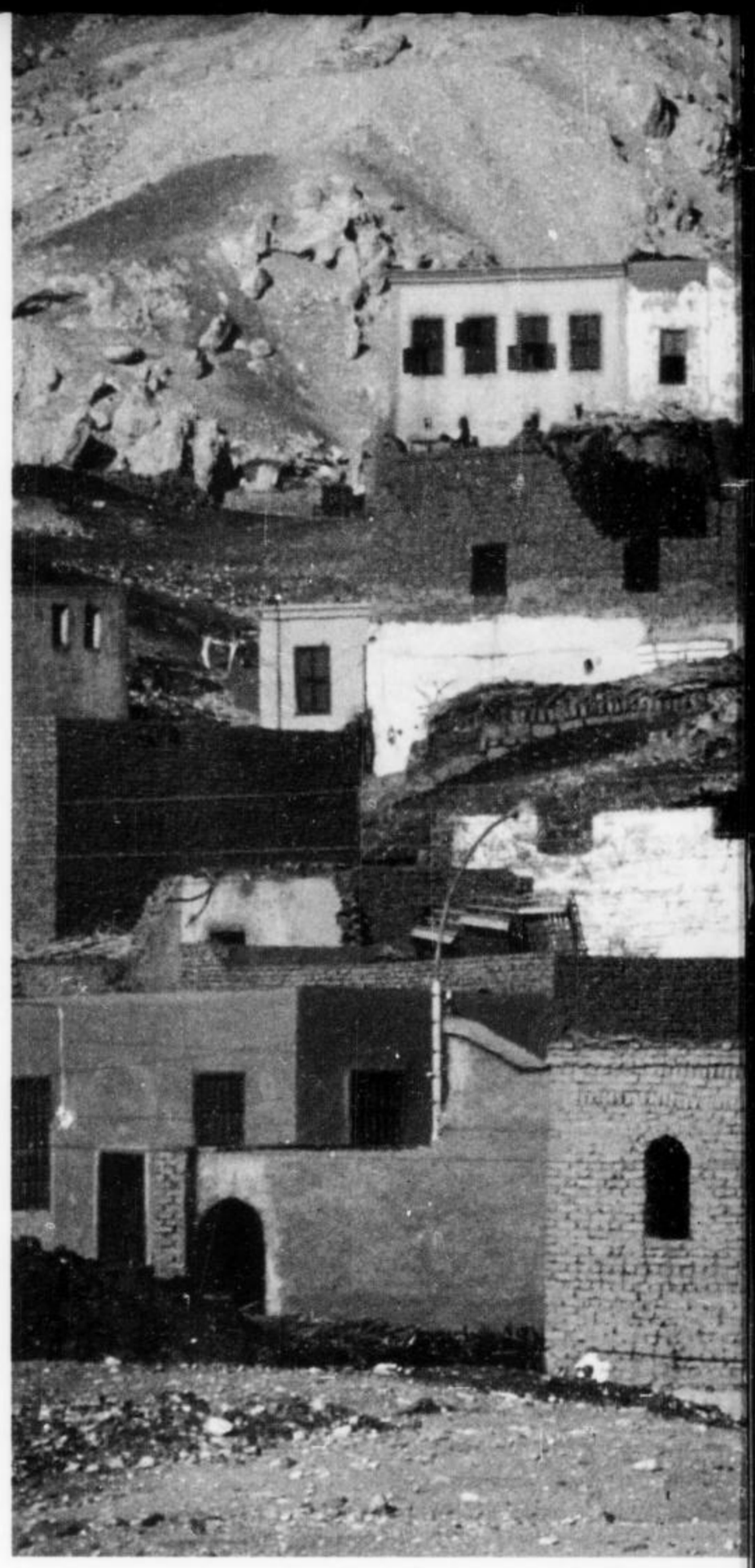
The storm breaks

The poet's art lay in his capacity to hold his listeners' rapt attention by channelling their sympathies first to one side, then to the other...by playing on their feelings of joy in victory and sadness in defeat, by striking a balance between the tenderness of the love scenes and the violence of the battle scenes, between the wisdom of the elders and the audacity of the young.

But this skilled game of checks and balances could not prevent the audience from splitting sooner or later into two camps, one taking the part of the Banou Hilal, the other that of the Banou Khalifa. Moreover, the supporters of each side were always virtually equal in number, heaven knows why. It was as if they were mysteriously reflecting the equilibrium sought by the poet.

However, from that moment, the tensions which permeated the story began to spread through the audience. The spectators became involved. As soon as the poet swung the story one way, the supporters of that side shouted with joy, while the supporters of the other side jeered their disapproval.

The task of the poet became increasingly deli-



The Egyptian village of Qurna.

cate, his mastery of the situation increasingly uncertain. The "night of the henna" rarely ended with a round of applause. Instead of the audience dispersing quietly into the night, and the poet and his troupe peacefully settling into the beds which had been prepared for them, the evening ended in an explosion of violence.

It was impossible to pinpoint the moment when emotion degenerated into confrontation. Even today we search our memories in vain trying to establish the sequence of cause and effect which suddenly turned the festivities sour. A predictable but unfathomable chain of events led to a conflict which was all the more strange and brutal since it had been expected, planned almost, for days. A word was uttered by someone in the crowd, in a hollow, scornful voice. There was an immediate menacing riposte, and a club was raised, then two, then three...

In the twinkling of an eye, the storm broke. Blows rained down from all directions. It was as though the audience had been seized by an irresistible need to give vent to a terrible, long-pent-up frustration. No one dreamt of asking where this frustration originated nor how far things would go now that the dam had burst.

MAHMOUD HUSSEIN is the pen name of two Egyptian writers who have published several books of political sociology, most recently *Versant sud de la liberté, Essai sur l'émergence de l'individu dans le tiers monde* ("The Southern Face of Liberty, an essay on the emergence of the individual in the Third World", La Découverte, Paris, 1989).

* In present-day Tunisia. *Editor*

The village dignitaries slipped away. The poet and his companions tiptoed off. A cacophony of police whistles pierced the nocturnal silence. Street lamps were broken and went out. But the scuffle continued in the dark—blind, relentless, breathless, until everyone was exhausted, until the calming of the anger for which the poet's tale was merely the occasion, its real reasons being buried in the past, in the silent march of the centuries.

The passing of an era

The years have gone by. The city has removed us from the slow rhythm of the country. Study and travel, cinema and television, have slowly reduced to a faint memory those evenings when the heroic acts of Abou Zeid and Zeinati came to life so vividly. The "night of the henna" is celebrated less and less in the villages. As for the poets, the children no longer wait at the roadside for them. They have gone, never to return.

Thanks to books and films we have discovered other epics; other heroes from many lands compete for our affections with those of the *Hilaliyya*. Certain episodes from different epics seem to merge curiously with others, and a resemblance between certain characters has appeared. Coincidence, mutual influence, a common source? How can one help but find in the besieged city of the Banou Khalifa a replica of the city of Troy, and in numerous episodes of the *Hilaliyya* a striking resemblance to parts of the *Iliad?*

Surely the atmosphere in which the poets of the Egyptian countryside recited their works is comparable to that in which the ancient Greek poets must have recited their epic songs? Didn't the Greek poets of old also modify their narrative to suit their audience, expanding or compressing certain scenes in response to the preferences they discerned in their listeners?

Perhaps that is what we miss today. In literature and in film, we learn and understand thousands of new things each day, a thousand things which only yesterday were beyond us. But we do not find, nor will we ever find again, the collective embrace of a stifling square where we hung on every word of an itinerant poet, whisked away as if by magic to remote cities where we exorcised the realities of the present by reliving mythical times. ■

Gilgamesh, the king who did not wish to die

After the death of his friend Enkidu, Gilgamesh is forced to accept that he too must die one day. An epic composed thirty-five centuries ago tells how Gilgamesh, his dream of immortality shattered, comes to terms with the human condition.

WRITTEN over thirty-five centuries ago, the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest extant epic in world history. Not only is it an immortal triumph of literary creation, it is also one of those vivid, venerable documents in which the innermost thoughts of the most ancient of our forefathers are still discernible through the mists of the past.

Written in Akkadian, a language distantly related to Arabic and Hebrew, and inscribed on clay tablets in impressive, wedge-shaped cuneiform script, it covers eleven tablets, each of which contains about 300 lines; a twelfth tablet was added later. So far, over a period of more than a century, about two-thirds of the work has been recovered as additional fragments have been found by chance during excavations in the archaeologically-rich soil of Iraq. Today, despite the gaps which remain, we can follow most of the incidents and vicissitudes of the narration in their sequence. Above all, we have a clear picture of the scope and significance of the work.

We also know enough to realize that, from the eighteenth century BC, the author, about whom we are otherwise totally ignorant, drew his inspiration from even more ancient folktales, at least some of which had circulated as short, individual legends. He succeeded in bringing together these scattered threads and weaving them into a coherent, original whole which has come down to us in the form of this grandiose, tragic epic.

Serigraph by the German artist Willi Baumeister (1889-1955) illustrates two lines from the Epic of Gilgamesh: "One double-hour he travelled; Dense is the darkness and there is no light."

The human condition

The author took as his hero Gilgamesh, the central figure of these tales, a former monarch of the country, who must have reigned in the ancient city of Uruk in the middle of the third millennium BC. His name tells us little and we have no other information about him apart from what is recounted in the old legends. Yet despite his royal title, duly brought to the reader's attention throughout the epic, Gilgamesh figures in the narrative neither in a political or military role for his battles and victories nor even as a national hero. He is portrayed simply as a man, as a pre-eminent model and representative of each member of the human community.

Throughout the work, his over-riding concern is neither with conquest, the retention of power and glory, nor with the prosperity of his

Opposite page, the hero Gilgamesh is shown holding a lion cub in this 8th-century-BC Assyrian bas-relief from the palace of Sargon II at Khursabad (Iraq).

(16)

BY JEAN BOTTÉRO

country and the diffusion of its culture, but with the desperate search for a solution to the most terrible of all problems—how to face up to death. The Gilgamesh epic is first and foremost an account of the drama of the human condition as personified by the ancient king of Uruk, with his adventures, dreams, hopes, sufferings and his final acceptance of failure.

With total mastery of his art, the author depicts the drama of the king's rise and fall. The first six tablets portray his rise to the summit and the remaining tablets his downfall. The epic may have been set down in writing by order of Gilgamesh himself on his return from his lengthy travels, "weary and worn" after having "seen all and committed everything to memory". He wanted to pass on to posterity the essential lesson of his life.

The admired and prosperous king of Uruk is at first depicted as a virtual superman, conscious of his strength, convinced of his superiority and tyrannizing the world around him. Alerted by the grievances of the people, the gods decide to intervene. They place the matter in the hands of Enki, the most intelligent among them. Resorting to a psychological subterfuge, Enki causes the creation of a kind of double and counterpart to Gilgamesh, a rival of equal stature and strength who will strip him of his feeling of uniqueness and turn him away from his excesses.

A memory, perhaps, preserved in legend, of ancient antagonisms between the refined city-dweller and the uncouth, "primitive" nomad, this double is a "savage", born and raised on the steppe beyond the limits of the civilized world. His name, Enkidu ("creature of Enki") recalls his origins.

Learning of the existence of this phenomenon and wishing to draw him to his presence, Gilgamesh sends to him Lascivia, one of many courtesans given up to the delights of "free love", a major prerogative of the advanced civilization of the city. Lascivia seduces Enkidu and converts him to the ways of city life. The first encounter between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is far from cordial. With each of them burning to assert his superiority, they "grappled with each other, snorting like bulls". Later, however, "they kissed one another and formed a friendship", for the author deliberately sets out to transform the "servant" of the legend into the intimate friend and companion of Gilgamesh, his alter ego.

The two friends

Together the two companions embark upon the great and dangerous adventure of the "Cedar Forest". Popular tradition may have preserved the memory of an immemorial urge which incited the people of Mesopotamia, a flat, bare land of clay and reeds, to venture out to distant mountains in search of wood for building, stone and metals. So Gilgamesh and Enkidu head towards the northwest, towards Amanus and Lebanon. Already the secret desire to transcend death by the achievement of fame and glory is taking shape: *"If I fall,"* says Gilgamesh, *"I will establish a name for myself... An everlasting* [*name*] *I will establish for myself."**

In several long stages, of which we have few details except that each of them is marked by a dream of good omen experienced by Gilgamesh and interpreted by his friend, they reach the dark, silent, mysterious immensity of the forest. According to legend, the forest is guarded by the fearsome giant Huwawa (or Humbaba), whom the two friends finally overcome.

At this point the author, aware of misfortune brewing quietly in the background, just as a distant, scarcely audible murmur presages the coming of a storm, tells of the heroes' first error, the first weight placed on the scales that will determine their destiny. After hesitating as to the giant's fate, they finally kill him. Free now to act as they please, they cut down vast numbers of the sacred cedars—thus committing their second error. Loading the tree trunks on a boat, they sail down the Euphrates and back to Uruk, where they are received in triumph.

The two friends are now at the pinnacle of their glory. However, a further incident occurs which the author skilfully presents as a success, but which, added to the two earlier events, will be fraught with consequence. The goddess Ishtar suddenly falls in love with Gilgamesh. Aware of her fickleness, Gilgamesh rejects her advances in scathing terms. In revenge, she asks her father, Anu, king of the gods, to send against Uruk the "Bull of Heaven", in the guise of which, according to legend, a terrible calamity had previously been visited upon the city.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the monster and cut it to pieces. But falling once more into the snare of excess which so often entraps the victorious, they compound this affront to Ishtar when Enkidu throws one of the beast's haunches in her face and threatens to make her a neckerchief of its entrails. Unaware of the imminence of his downfall, Gilgamesh marks his triumph with a brilliant celebration held in his palace. In a drunken outburst, he declares himself to be "the most splendid among the heroes, the most glorious among men."

Just as in life, in which our greatest successes often foreshadow and set off a train of events which leads to defeat or disaster, it is at this point that the errors of the past have their combined effect, that the gods react and the storm breaks. At the start of the seventh tablet, after a terrible nightmare in which he sees the gods in council condemn him to death, Enkidu suddenly falls ill, goes into a gradual decline and realizes that he is going to die. He curses the courtesan who, by raising him to a higher station in life, set him on the road to misfortune, and expires in the arms of his despairing friend. At first Gilgamesh is unwilling to believe that he is dead, refusing even to heed the hideous appearance gradually taken on by the dead man's corpse "until the worm fell upon his face". For the first time the hero is experiencing *real* death and seeing the unbearable image and presentiment of his own death conjured up by the sudden extinction of his friend:

When I die, shall I not be like unto Enkidu?
Sorrow has entered my heart.

To rid himself of the thought with which he is now obsessed and to find the remedy for death, whose true face has been so cruelly revealed to him, Gilgamesh sets off in quest of the secret of eternal life.

'The gift of life everlasting'

He knows that the gods once gave the gift of everlasting life to one man, Utanapishtim ("I have found life") the sole survivor of the Flood, thanks to whom the continuance of the human race had been assured. But after granting him this privilege, the gods had set him apart from other mortals, sending him to the end of the earth. Gilgamesh decides to go and seek out Utanapishtim and to learn from him the secret of this signal favour.

Arriving after an amazing, interminable journey at the shores of the last distant sea separating him from his goal, he encounters a mysterious nymph, Siduri (the ale-wife), who lives in that isolated region and who warns him of the futility of his quest:

Gilgamesh, whither runnest thou?
The life which thou seekest thou wilt not find.
[*For*] *when the gods created mankind,*
They allotted death to mankind,
[*But*] *life they retained in their keeping.*
Thou, O Gilgamesh, let thy belly be full;
Day and night be thou merry;
Make every day [*a day of*] *rejoicing.*
Day and night do thou dance and play.
Let thy raiment be clean,
Thy head be washed, [*and*] *thyself be bathed in water.*
Cherish the little one holding thy hand,
[*And*] *let thy wife rejoice in thy bosom.*
This is the lot of [*mankind*]...

But lost in his dream of eternal life, he does not heed her words and continues on his way. When at last he finds himself in the presence of Utanapishtim, he asks him outright how he obtained this miraculous favour of the gods. In reply, Utanapishtim recounts the story of the Flood. He tells how the gods decided to destroy the race of men they had created to serve them,

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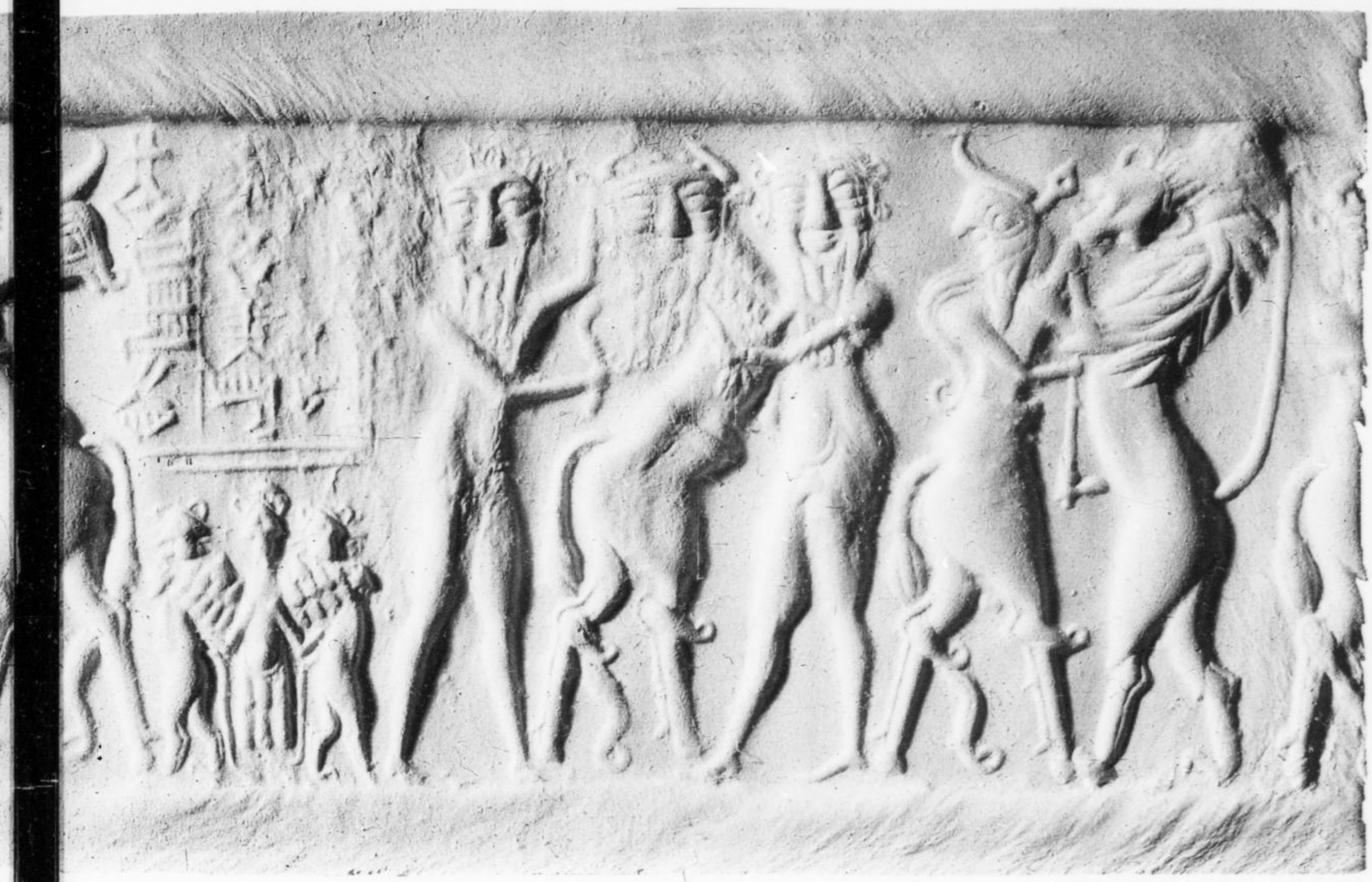
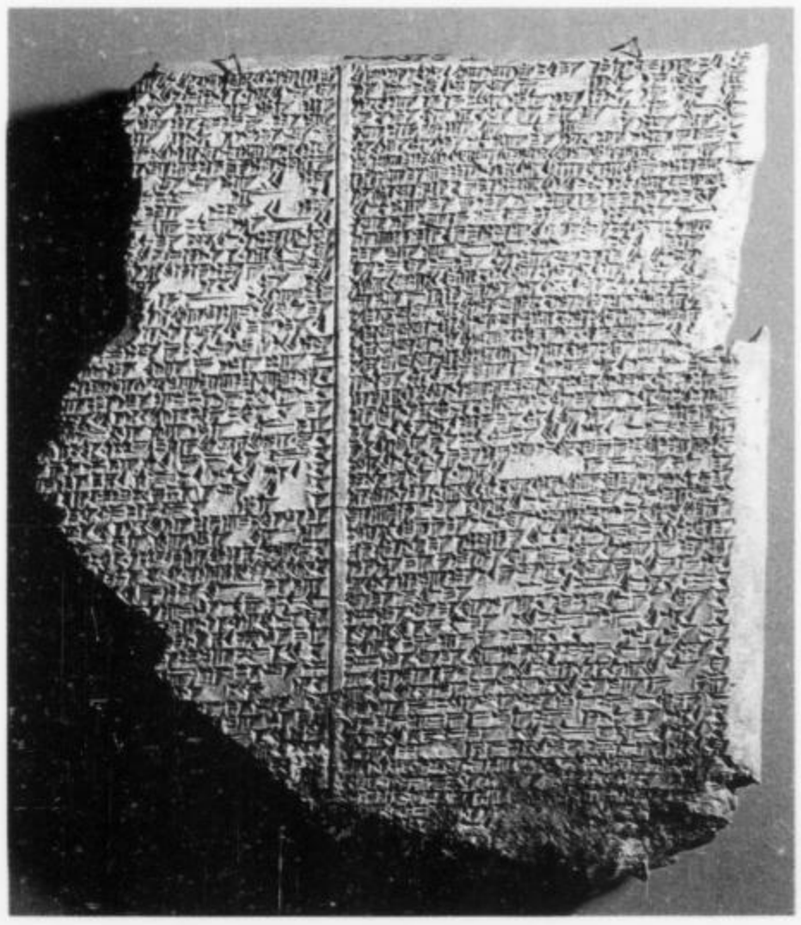


Gilgamesh and Enkidu destroy the Bull of Heaven and other monsters. Plaster cast from an early Mesopotamian cylinder seal (2400 BC).

The story of the Flood as it is recorded in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Babylonian tablet from Nineveh inscribed with cuneiform writing (7th century BC).



but who had multiplied and whose noise prevented them from sleeping.

Aware of the difficult situation the gods would find themselves in once men had all vanished, the god Enki, acting on his own, arranged for one man to be spared, with all necessities, in a boat that would save him from the Deluge. It was for this reason alone that the grateful gods had promised Utanapishtim that he should never die. It was hardly likely that Gilgamesh would ever find himself in a similar situation.

Moreover, to show Gilgamesh that he is not really made for everlasting life, Utanapishtim challenges him to remain for just six days without yielding to sleep, that daily rehearsal of death. Gilgamesh takes up his challenge, but falls asleep on the very first day. There is nothing left for him to do but to depart, his dream shattered, with nothing to show for all his efforts and sufferings:

For whom have my hands become weary?
For whom is the blood of my heart being spent?

Gilgamesh returns home and the author of the epic, briefly depicting Uruk as a splendid opulent city, seems intent on bringing his hero, and through him all men, back to the joys of this life, which are, as the nymph Siduri had proclaimed, "the lot of mankind". ■

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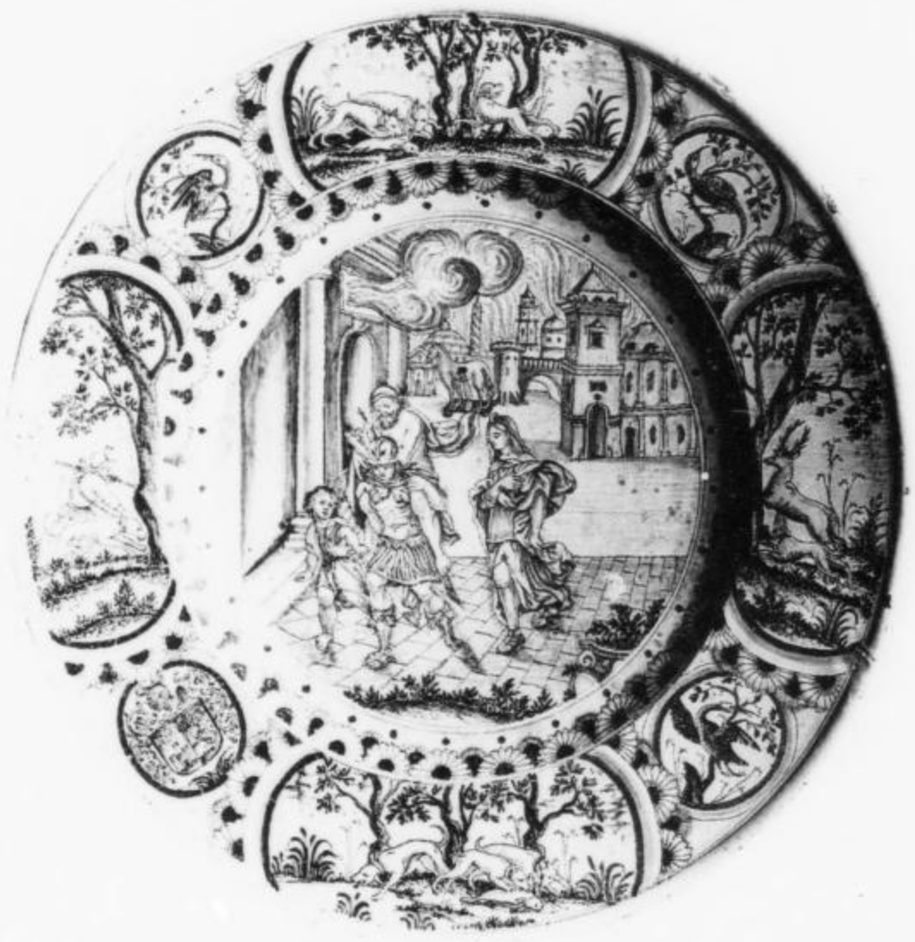
* Quotations from *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, by Alexander Heidel, Phoenix Books, University of Chicago Press, 1963.

The adventures of Aeneas chronicled in Virgil's great poem the ***Aeneid*** *make a powerful human drama whose force is undiminished by time.*

Aeneas, Rome's man of destiny

BY JEAN-PAUL BRISSON



Aeneas leaves the burning city of Troy, carrying his father Anchises on his back. Marseilles pottery, 18th century.

Left, "Venus appears to Aeneas and sends him Cupid." Detail of a fresco by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) in the Aeneid room of the Villa Valmarana, at Vicenza (Italy).

WRITTEN between 29 BC and 19 BC, the Roman poet Virgil's epic, the *Aeneid*, recounts the adventures of the Trojan hero Aeneas, fruit of the union of the mortal Anchises with the goddess Venus.

Having miraculously survived the destruction of Troy, Aeneas, accompanied by his father, his infant son Iulus and a handful of faithful companions, sets sail in search of the place, appointed by destiny but as yet unknown to him, where he is to build a new Troy. As his journey unfolds, he comes to realize that the city's mysterious new site is situated in Italy, in the region of Latium.

Warrings and wanderings

Before reaching his goal, however, he is fated to wander the length and breadth of the Mediterranean for seven years. This is partly because the utterances of the oracles, who purport to guide him in his quest, are inevitably far from clear. A false interpretation of one oracular message makes him think for a time that his destination is Crete until, warned of his error by the outbreak of a terrible plague, he is forced to flee the island. But the prime cause of his misfortunes is the unrelenting hatred of the all-powerful Juno, wife of Jupiter, the king of the gods.

This hatred stems from an ancient incident recounted by Homer—the famous judgement of Paris, the Trojan who dared to award the prize for beauty to Venus rather than to Juno. As depicted at the beginning of Virgil's epic, the queen of Olympus neither can nor wishes to forget what she considers to be a personal affront for which, through Paris, she holds all Trojans responsible. She finds it intolerable that a small group of Trojans should have survived her vengeance and have the temerity to want to rebuild a city that is for her accursed. No subterfuge that may prevent Aeneas from achieving his aim and ensure his final downfall is too low for her.

After seven years of wanderings, Aeneas lands in Sicily where his old father dies. By now he knows for certain how and where he will discover the site to which destiny will lead him and it is with confidence and a light heart that he sets out for Italy. Seeing him so near his goal, Juno succumbs to a murderous rage and bribes Aeolus, the keeper of the winds, to unleash a furious tempest. The Trojan fleet is scattered and largely destroyed; the few survivors are thrown up on the African coast not far from Carthage.

Thanks to the intervention of Venus, anxious to ensure the safety of her son, the sovereign of those parts, the Phoenician queen, Dido, welcomes the shipwrecked survivors with generous hospitality. Taking advantage of these events in a further attempt to detain Aeneas far from his Italian goal, Juno, with the complicity of Venus, thrusts the unfortunate Dido into the arms of her Trojan guest.

Surrendering himself to the delights of a mad

passion, the Trojan hero forgets his predestined mission for twelve long months. When Jupiter imperiously takes him to task, however, he remembers the duty fate has laid upon him and leaves Carthage and the delights of love, setting sail to the light of the funeral pyre on which the despairing Dido has thrown herself.

A stop at Cumae gives Aeneas, guided by the Sibyl, the opportunity to descend into the nether regions where he encounters his father's shade, who presents to him those who will play leading roles in the accomplishment of Rome's future glory. Aeneas next arrives at the mouth of the Tiber where the fulfilment of a prophecy confirms that his long voyage is over. Recognizing in him the foreigner his diviners have predicted will marry his daughter Lavinia, Latinus, the king of the region, welcomes Aeneas with open arms.

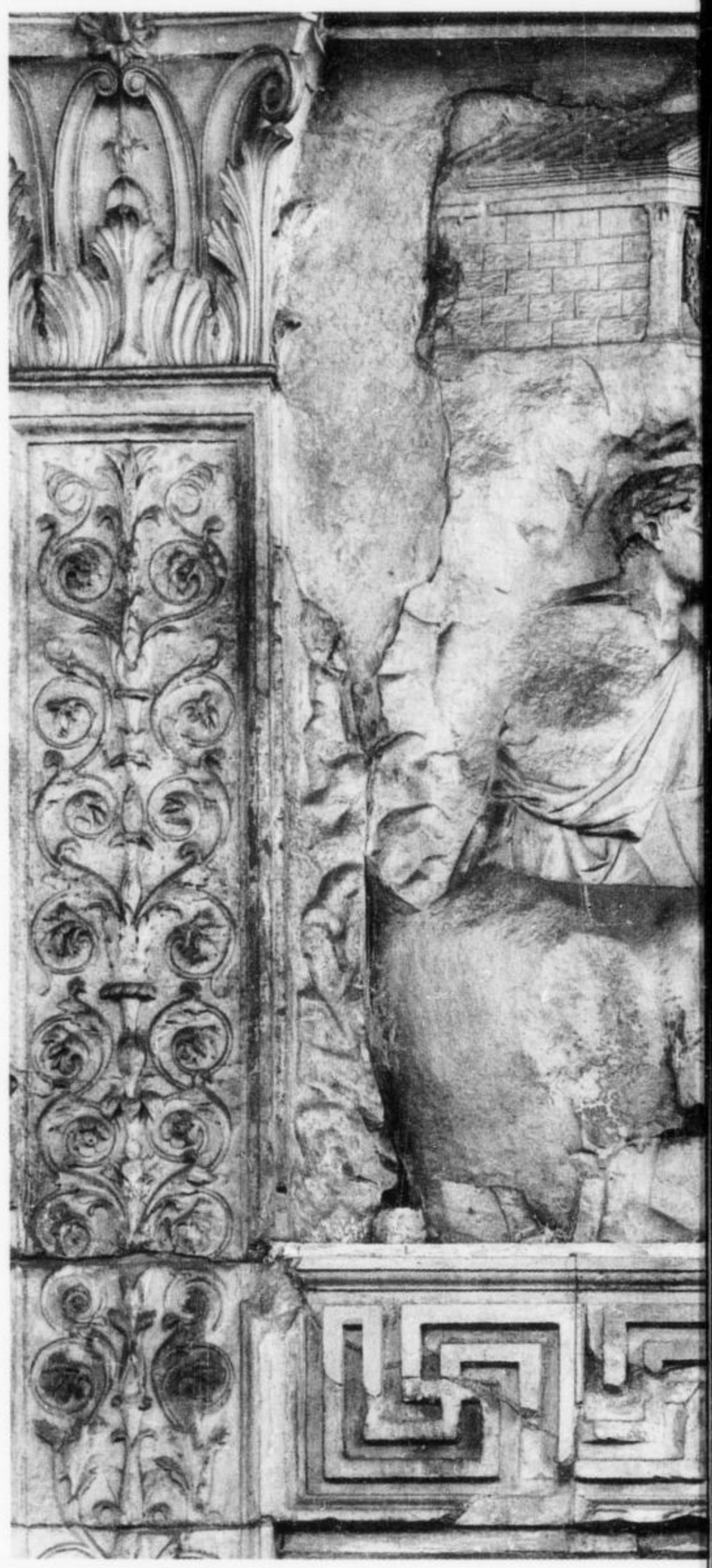
Juno, however, returns to the charge. Arousing the jealousy of Turnus, a suitor of Lavinia who cannot bear to find himself set aside in favour of the newly-arrived stranger, she sets the scene for a desperate struggle. A long series of combats ensues in which the warriors of both camps distinguish themselves by brilliant individual exploits.

An epic that reinterpreted history

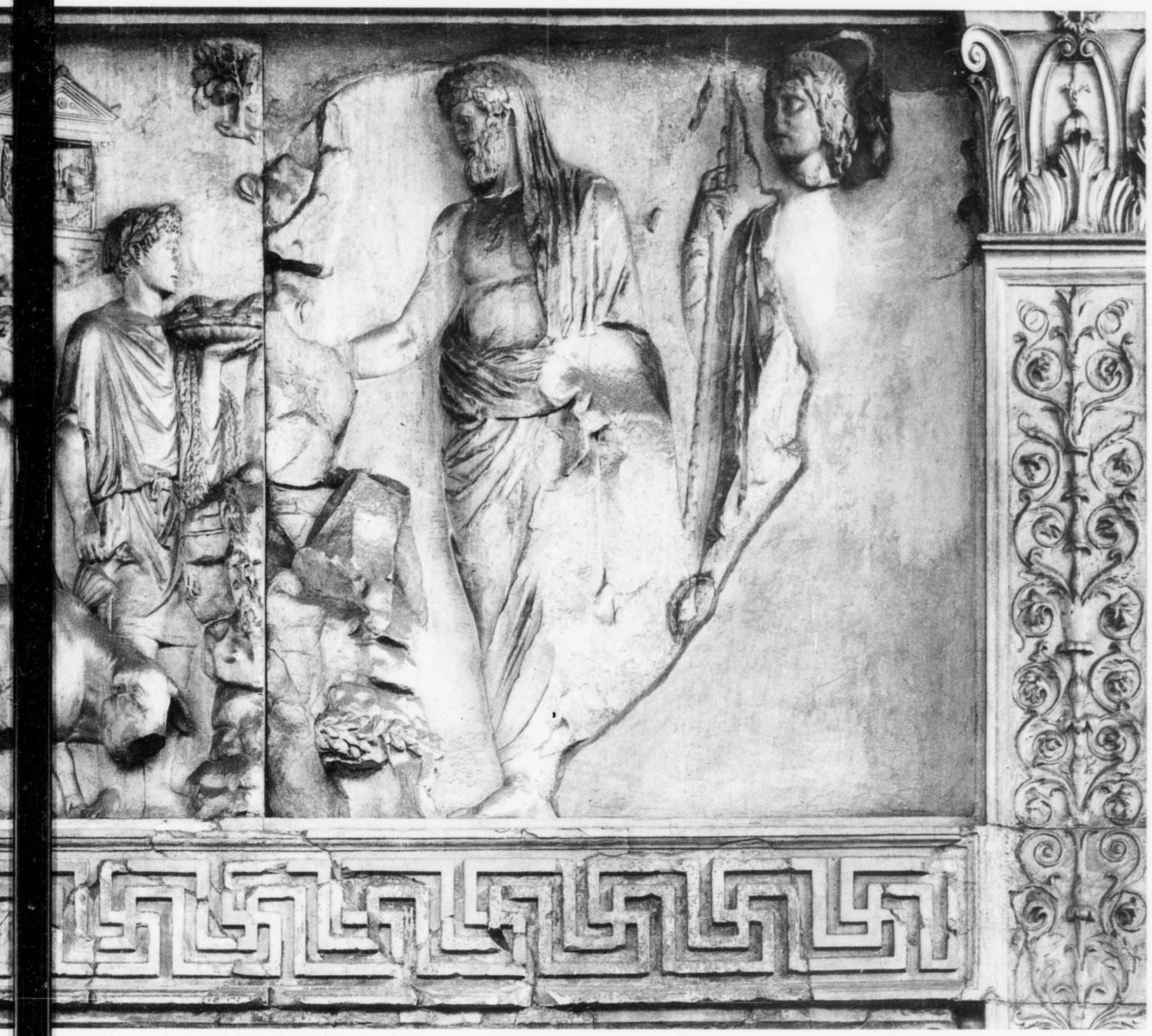
Finally, weary of the useless carnage, the two sides make a solemn pact to leave the resolution of their quarrel to the outcome of a single combat between Aeneas and Turnus. Aeneas, of course, emerges victorious and at this point the epic draws to a close. However, a number of predictions inserted throughout the poem foreshadow the future course of history that the epic itself leaves untold—how Iulus, Aeneas' son, will found the city of Alba from whence, 300 years later, will come forth Romulus and Remus, the twin founders of Rome.

The choice of such a subject offered many advantages. In literary terms it demonstrates

"Aeneas and the Shrine of the Penates." Detail from the marble frieze on the Altar of the Augustan Peace, Rome (1st century BC).



"Virgil presents Dante to Homer." Detail of a fresco by the French painter Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) in the cupola of the library of the Senate, Paris.



fidelity to the Homeric tradition without being a slavish imitation of it. Of the twelve books that make up the epic, the first six, in which the hero's perilous voyage from Troy to Italy is recounted, conjure up in the reader's mind overtones of the *Odyssey;* the last six, in which the war in Italy incited by Juno is related, are an open evocation of the *Iliad.*

Yet though the Homeric model was clearly in the minds of both the poet and his readers, it was used to tell a quite different tale. Furthermore, while deliberately placing itself within the context of Greek epic poetry, the *Aeneid* appears to be an extension of it, since the action begins at the precise point where it ends in Homer—with the capture and destruction of Troy.

Above all, the subject furnished political advantages. The legend unfolded in the *Aeneid* provided justification for Rome's complex relationship with the Hellenic world, which involved military and political domination coupled with a certain cultural dependency. Representing Rome as a resurgence of a Troy destroyed by the Greeks gave the Roman conquest of Greece the colouring of legitimate revenge. Virgil did not miss the opportunity to put into the mouth of Jupiter, in a lengthy prophecy addressed to Venus, a proclamation that Rome would destroy the most renowned cities of Greece, which were responsible for the fall of Troy.

Yet Rome was indebted to Greece for this justificatory legend, which has its roots in the *Iliad.* By the end of the fourth century BC, at the latest, Greek historians had given shape to the myth of the arrival of Aeneas in Latium and of his founding of Lavinium (today Pratica di Mare). Thus began a subtle interplay between victor and vanquished with the victory of Roman arms over Greece finding justification in legendary tales evolved in Greece itself.

JEAN-PAUL BRISSON, of France, is professor emeritus at the University of Paris X, where he taught Roman civilization and literature. His published works include *Carthage ou Rome* ("Carthage or Rome", 1973) and *Virgile, son temps et le nôtre* ("Virgil, his time and ours", 1980).

Not least of the advantages of Virgil's epic was that it glorified Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Adopted by Julius Caesar, Augustus belonged to the Julian family which claimed direct descent from Aeneas. The claims were supported by a phonetic play, obligingly echoed by Virgil, on the name of Aeneas' son. From the original "Ilus" (which simply means Trojan), "Iulus", then "Iulius", were derived. The philologists of old were very partial to such approximations.

The predictions inserted throughout the epic, foretelling the future grandeur of the descendants of Aeneas, naturally referred to the one who was foreseen to be the most illustrious among them—the emperor Augustus. Contemporary readers had no difficulty in making the link between the great future foretold for the descendants of the epic hero and the new régime of their own day. By the same token, this new régime no longer appeared to be the result of chance but the fulfilment of an eternal destiny.

The war that Aeneas was compelled to wage to secure a firm foothold in Latium also provided the opportunity to foretell the coming of the multi-cultural empire over which Augustus was to rule. For in his struggle against Turnus, Aeneas was aided both by a small Greek community established on the site of the future city of Rome and by an Etruscan prince. This coalition of peoples of such diverse cultures—Latin, Hellenic and Etruscan—was already, in itself, a foretaste of the cultural situation of historic Rome.

Furthermore, at the close of the epic, Juno renounces her vendetta and accepts the defeat of her protégé Turnus on condition that the newly-arrived Trojans in turn abandon their customs and their language and merge with the native population to constitute a single people. The *Aeneid* concludes less with the vision of a bloody fight to the death than with the promise of the harmonious fusion of different cultures within the framework of a political union. Thus the Virgilian epic made Augustus, the prestigious descendant the oracles were united in telling Aeneas he would sire, the guarantor of that fusion and that union.

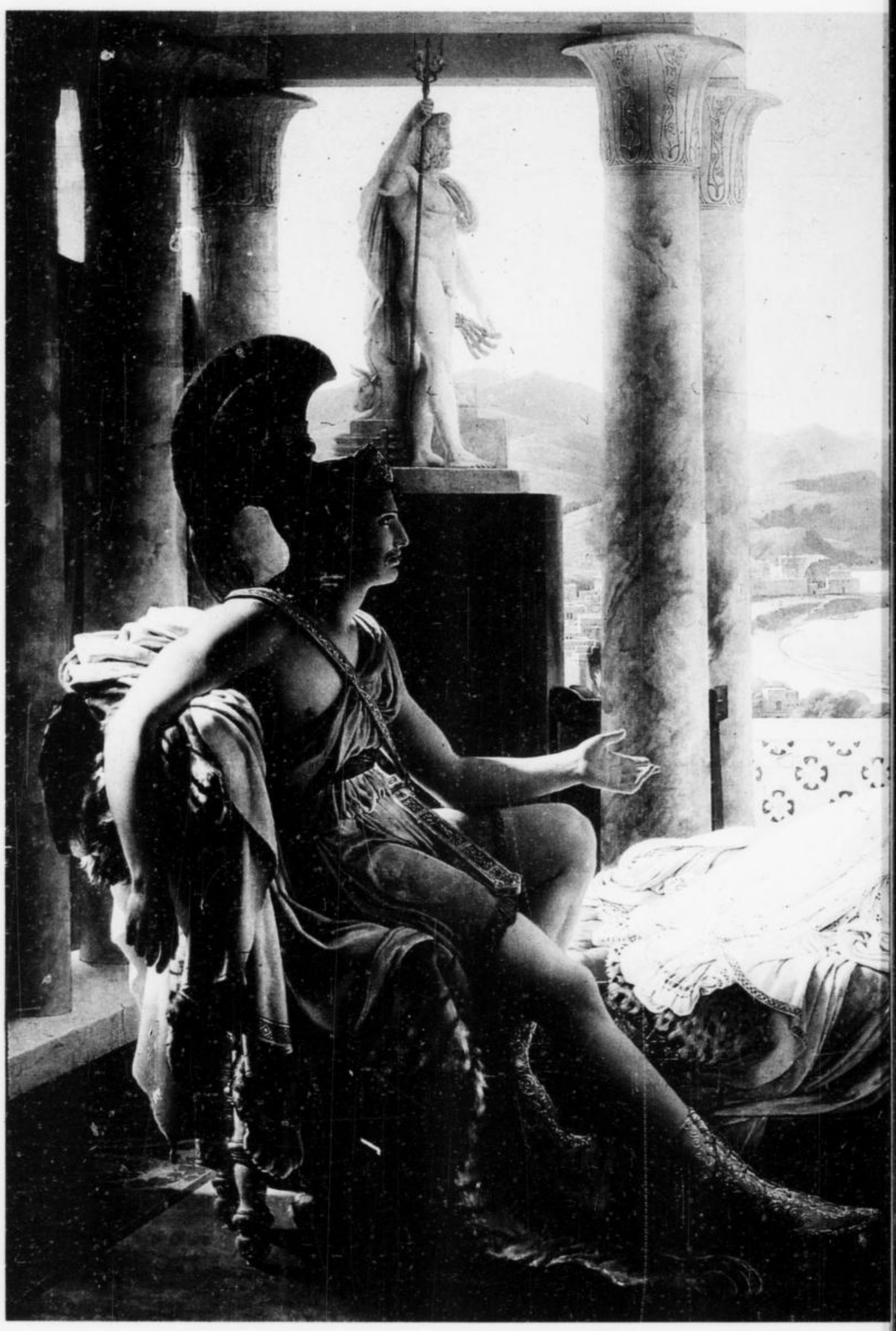
A poem for all time

Though it may have been a piece of topical propaganda, placed within a historically limited context, the *Aeneid* is well worth reading today because it was written by a very great poet, a genius of such stature that the style and the events of his epic narration are rich in connotations and implications that go far beyond the author's immediate purposes.

The modern reader will be all the more at ease with Virgil in that the hero of his epic is not cast in the monolithic mould of the Homeric model. Robots tirelessly performing feats of arms, Homer's heroes maintain virtually unchanging patterns of behaviour and feelings throughout his narrative and the reader leaves them at the end of the epic as they were at the beginning. Virgil, however, endows his hero with the full panoply of human psychological complexity, with doubts, uncertainties and moments of despair.

The *Aeneid* breaks new ground in epic poetry by its use of the narrative technique to reveal the inner feelings of Aeneas. Instead of being related by an aloof third person, the dramatic episodes of the destruction of Troy and the hero's wanderings in search of the site on which his city is destined to be rebuilt are recounted by an "I" still pulsating with the excitement of the events through which he has lived. From the start, a kind of intimacy is established between the hero and the reader, to whom he seems to speak personally. And this initial intimacy is reflected throughout the narrative.

By introducing the psychological factor, Virgil avoids the snare of a simplistic dualism



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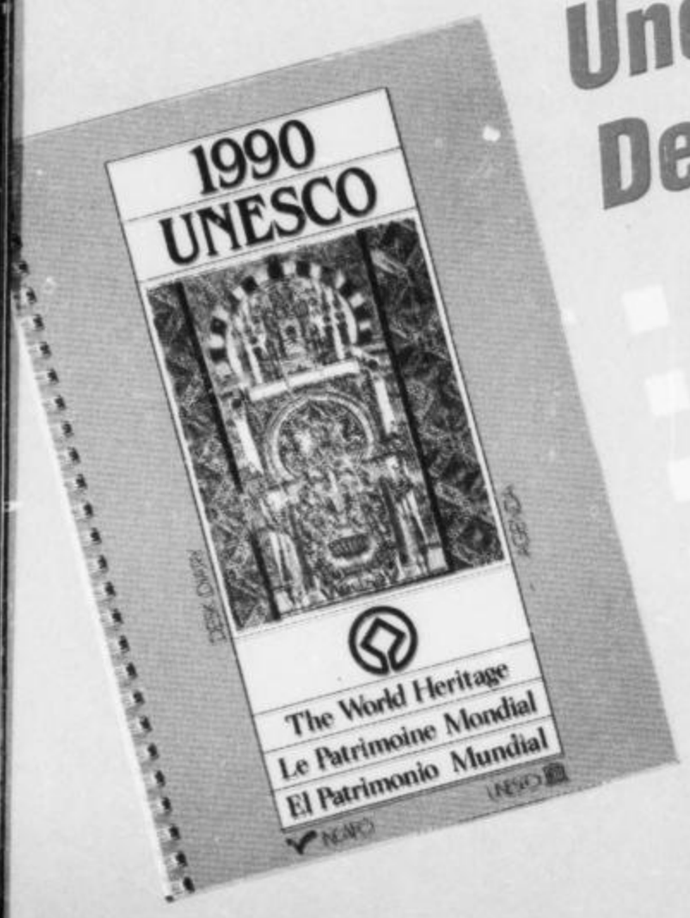

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"Aeneas tells Dido about the disasters that have befallen the city of Troy" (1815). A painting by Pierre Narcisse Guérin (1774-1833).

"Juno pleads with Aeolus to unleash the winds against Aeneas' boat." A painting by the Italian artist Lucio Massari (1569-1633).

between good and bad people. Dido and Turnus are, it is true, formidable obstacles to the accomplishment of Aeneas' mission and can be counted among the negative characters in the epic. But it would be too simple to leave it at that and Virgil succeeds in portraying them with sufficient complexity to make them seem more worthy of compassion than of enmity. His lines on Dido's tragic suicide are among the most sensitive ever written by a poet of Antiquity and even today it is impossible to read them without being profoundly moved.

Finally, what makes the *Aeneid* an epic apart is its initiatory connotations. The difficulties the hero has to face to accomplish his mission are a poetic transposition of the classic ordeals of an initiation ceremony. Aeneas comes through these ordeals not only as the victor but as a man transformed. The Aeneas who finally settles in Latium is a new man, destined for a new life.

The rites and mysteries of the religions of Antiquity may be of little interest to the modern reader, but no-one can remain unmoved by this lesson in self-transcendence, by this splendid example of a mastered fate. ■

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چو بشنید بوراب از او داستان
بشاگردی او گشت همداستان

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چو شد تافته سوی سندان شتاب
بگشتاسب داد و نبگی سپرد
بپرداخت پتک و بشد از برش

بزد بتک و بشکست سندان اوی
بپرسید بوراب کاین جوی کیست
بپرداخت کل و آبهای روان
بپرسید بوراب کاین جوی کیست

نه سنگ و نه آهن نه آتش نه دم
چو بشنید گشتاسب ازان شد دژم
بپرداخت پتک و بشد از برش
چو بشنید گشتاسب ازان شد دژم

نماند بکس راز سختی نه رنج
نه آسانی و شادمانی نه رنج
بدو نیک بر ما همی بگذرد
نه آسانی و شادمانی نه رنج

همی گفت گشتاسب دل ستمه
خرد شان و جوشان ز چرخ بلند
نیابد ز گیتی جز از مهر بهر
خرد شان و جوشان ز چرخ بلند

درخت گل و آبهای روان
نشستن گه و ساز مرد جوان
درخت کش سایه بر سرش آب
نشستن گه و ساز مرد جوان

بزخم تو پتک ان ندارد توان
نه روی خورش نه جای نشست
نباشد درشم مرگ دارد خرد
نه روی خورش نه جای نشست

یکی روستا دید نزدیک شهر
نهان گشته ز و چشمه آفتاب
نهان گشته ز و چشمه آفتاب

Written almost a thousand years ago, ***The Epic of the Kings*** *tells the story of the Iranian people from the time of the world's creation. National epic, landmark in world literature and a profound expression of the Iranian soul, Ferdowsi's masterpiece is still read and recited throughout Iran.*

The Epic of the Kings

BY NAHAL TADJADOD

IN a square in Teheran, the capital of Iran, there is a statue of Ferdowsi: the poet holds his *Epic of the Kings (Shah-nama)* in his hand and gazes at the peaks of the Alborz mountains. When I was young, my parents often took me to this place and while they looked on attentively I recited these lines by Ferdowsi:

I have toiled painfully these thirty years. I have restored Iran to life by my verse.
Henceforth I cannot die; for I live, having broadcast the seeds of my verses.

These words were engraved in the memory of the child I was then and I know that they have shaped my innermost identity. There is nothing astonishing in that. For almost a thousand years Ferdowsi's poem has been read, recited and copied in Iran. Even today it is recited in the cafés. Early on it became our national epic.

Why has it always been so popular? Not because of the originality of its subject—the history of ancient Iran from the time of its first mythical king to the last sovereign of the Sassanid dynasty in the seventh century AD—nor because of the novelty of its content. "What I will say, all have already told," Ferdowsi claimed. The poet transmitted; he invented nothing. He drew on old oral traditions and on ancient texts such as the *Avesta,* a holy book of the eighth century BC, or reworked somewhat earlier tales on the same theme.

The first monument of Persian literature

This immense poem of 50,000 couplets appeared in the tenth century, at a key moment in the history of Iranian culture. Since the fall of the Sassanids, the literary language of Iran had been Arabic. Middle Persian, the main vehicle of Sassanid civilization, was disappearing. At this moment, a young literature in an Iranian idiom—Persian—emerged in the east. Ferdowsi's poem would be its first masterpiece.

The Epic of the Kings does not describe the deeds of a single hero or king nor even a long adventure. It begins with the creation of the world and relates the history of fifty reigns on three distinct planes: the mythical, the epic and the historical.

The first part relates civilizing myths. The Pishdadians, the "first created", teach men to clothe themselves, to work metal, to master fire, to tame animals and to organize themselves in society. After ruling for 700 years, King Jamshid, succumbing to pride, has to yield his throne to a demoniac creature, the tyrant Zahhak who will rule for a thousand years. His malign power will finally be conquered by the justice-loving Faridun. These heroes, who personify the conflict between the forces of darkness and light, constitute a religious theme which is typically Iranian.

The second, longest and most truly epic part

Ferdowsi and the three poets of the court of Ghazni, the ancient capital of the powerful empire of the Ghaznevids, in what is now Afghanistan.

The first part of Ferdowsi's poem ***The Epic of the Kings*** *describes how Jamshid, king of Iran, taught men how to make weapons of war, to spin and weave, and to build houses and ships. Left, a 17th-century miniature showing Jamshid giving a lesson in craftsmanship.*

of the poem evokes the reign of the Kaianid kings. Here, in the centrepiece of the poem, light has triumphed. Rostam is the champion of all the heroes who live at the Kaianid court. Prodigiously strong, loyal to his king and faithful to his country, he is the terror of the enemy. This period is marked by interminable wars against Turan, a central Asian country whose ruler Afrasiyab is the sworn enemy of Iran.

In the final part, the poet presents a number of historical figures but in a rather fantastic light. He gives a notable account of the conquest of Alexander the Great (Sekandar), based on the Alexander legend of the Orient. The ending, even closer to history, tells of the exploits of the Sassanid rulers until the end of the dynasty.

Faridun and Zahhak: the just man and the tyrant

The story of Zahhak the tyrant, told in the first and most brilliant part of the poem, extols the sufferings of a martyred people.

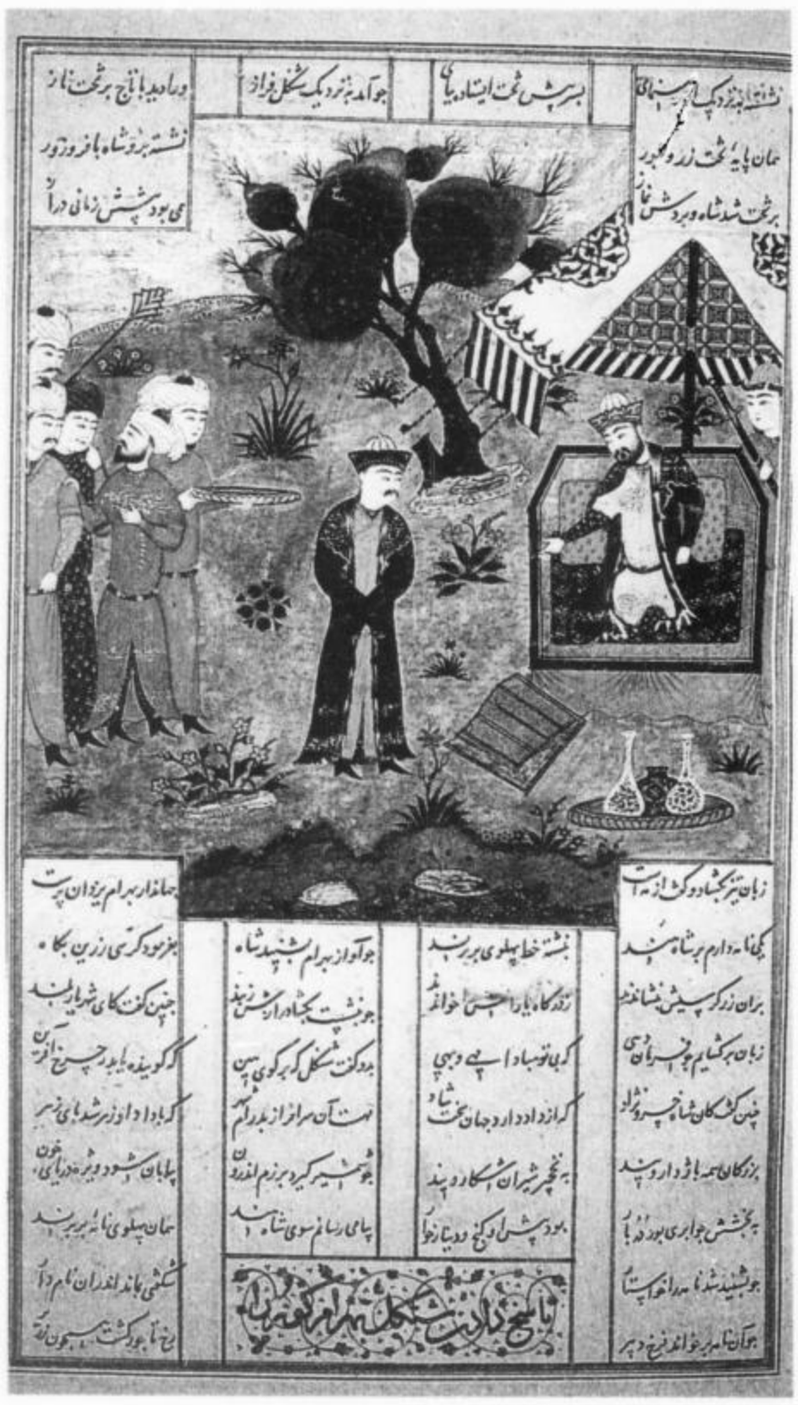
The courageous but wayward son of King Mardas, Zahhak is led astray by Eblis, the devil. After making a pact with Eblis, Zahhak usurps the throne. Revealing himself to the king in various forms, the devil extends his power further each day. One day Eblis presents himself in the guise of a cook. "The diet is not varied," he says, "for flesh is not eaten," and he wishes Zahhak to eat all kinds of viands, both birds and quadrupeds. When the devil, who has gained Zahhak's confidence, embraces him, a black serpent thrusts its head out of each of the tyrant's shoulders. Whenever he cuts them off they sprout anew like two branches of a tree. Then Eblis appears again, this time disguised as a physician, and proposes as a remedy that Zahhak should eat two human brains each day.

Thus for a thousand years the demons cause evil to reign and no one dares talk openly of good. But one night Zahhak dreams that he is laid low by a young prince who strikes him with a bull-headed mace and drags him in chains to Mount Damavand. Plunged in darkness, the world was as black as a raven's wing. The tyrant consults the Mubads, the Zoroastrian priests, who read the stars and tell him that his vanquisher, who is not yet born, will be called Faridun. "He will hate you, for his father will die at your hand and you will also kill the cow that will serve him as nurse. To avenge the cow he will take up the bull-headed mace."

Mad with anxiety, the king hunts everywhere for traces of Faridun. The blessed child is born at the same time as the most marvellous of cows. He is entrusted by his mother to the keeper of the park where the nurse-cow lives, and is nourished with her milk. One day Zahhak hears of the park and the cow, kills the fabulous animal and rushes to Faridun's house. He finds no one there. Overcome with fear, Faridun's mother has taken her son to Mount Alborz.

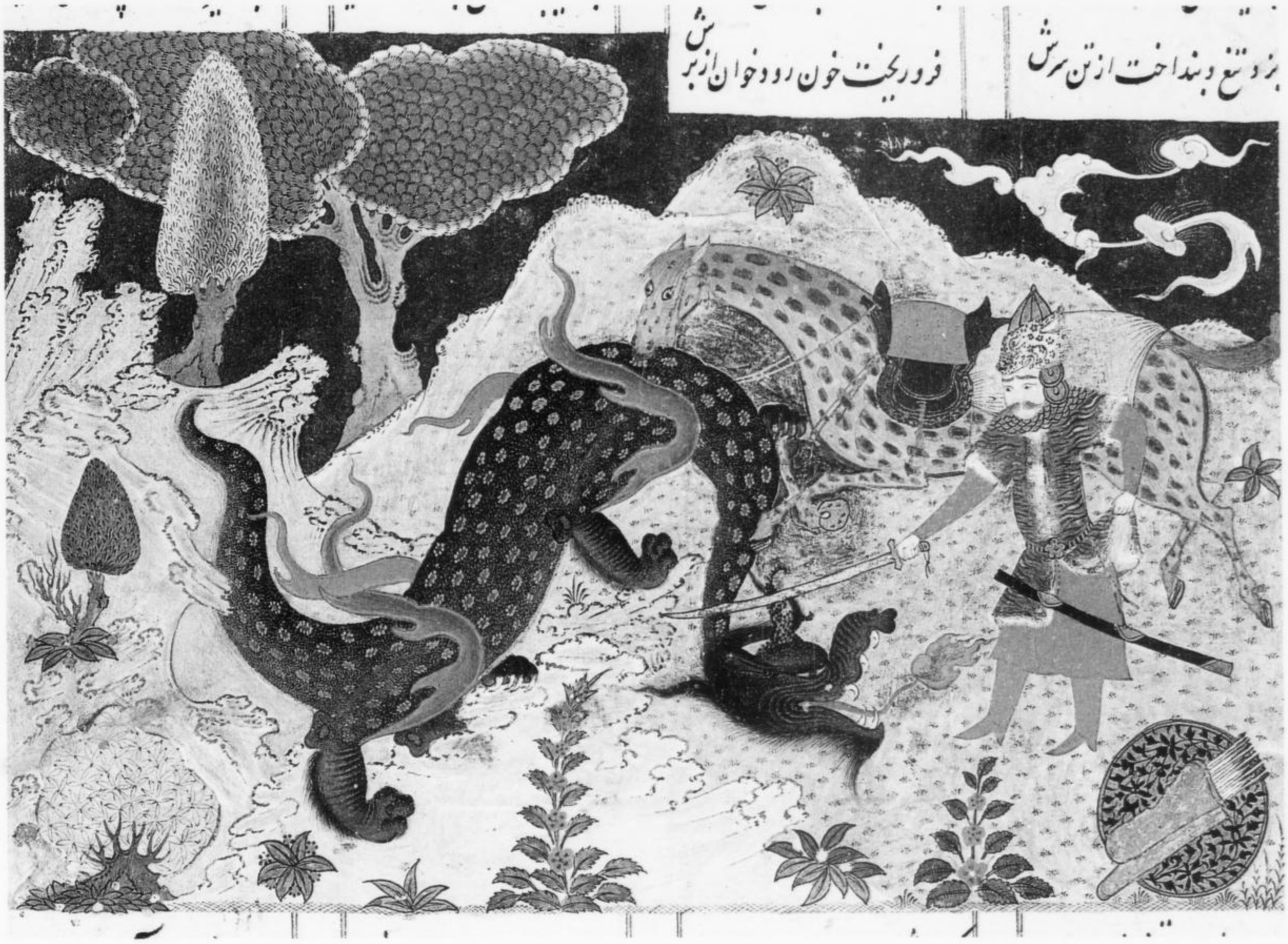
At the age of sixteen Faridun learns of his origins from his mother and decides to fight the tyrant. In anguish Zahhak convokes all the elders of the land to seek their support. "I desire you to subscribe to a proclamation on my behalf that as commander in chief I have sown no seed but that of uprightness...and that I would never fail to maintain justice." All consent except one man, Kava the Blacksmith, who rises in protest. "I am Kava, seeking for justice. Most of the wrong done to me comes from yourself. It is you who constantly thrust the lancet into my heart. Why do you inflict harm on my children? I had eighteen alive in the world, and now only one remains." Overcome with astonishment and fear, Zahhak restores the man's remaining son to him and asks him in exchange to add his testimony to the proclamation. Kava reads the proclamation, tears it into pieces, and tramples them underfoot.

Kava leaves the palace and the people crowd around him. Fastening a blacksmith's leather apron to a spearhead, he calls on the people to free themselves from the tyrant's yoke. Followed by a multitude of the stout-hearted, Kava the liberator sets out in search of Faridun, who agrees to lead the popular rising. The people of the city and the army mass before the palace, whose guards dare not resist. Faridun rides into the palace without striking a blow and seizes the royal crown. Attacked by Zahhak, the young prince shatters Zahhak's helmet with his bull-headed mace. At that instant the angel Sorush appears and stops Faridun killing Zahhak. "Do not strike



Sekandar (Alexander the Great) is seen visiting the emperor of China in this 15th-century miniature illustrating an incident from ***The Epic of the Kings.***

NAHAL TADJADOD, Iranian Sinologist, is the author of a doctoral thesis on the influence of Buddhism on Chinese Manichaeism which will be published shortly by Editions du Cerf, Paris. She is currently participating in Unesco's Silk Roads Project.



him down," he says. "His time has not yet come. Tie him securely inside the mountain." Faridun then drives the tyrant into the mountains and wishes to strike off his head, but the angel Sorush appears again and tells him to leave the captive in fetters on Mount Damavand to endure an eternal agony.

A poet of human grandeur

In the person of Faridun, an era of enlightenment and justice succeeds a long period of obscurity and tyranny. Here Ferdowsi returns to pre-Islamic traditions; he takes this idea of an eternal combat between good and evil from Zoroastrian eschatology. The interminable wars between Iran and Turan are the reflection of this. But Ferdowsi does not profess a naive dualism. He shows that these two principles coexist in everyone: human beings can do good as well as spread evil.

Thus, after a thousand years of tyranny, light and good seem to triumph: the new king, mandated by heaven, serves his people devotedly. But evil persists, it has not ceased to exist. This is what the angel means when he twice prevents the tyrant from being put to death. Zahhak is finally fettered on the summit of Mount Alborz as if to show by his existence that the victory of good over evil has not yet been won.

Ferdowsi bases his poem on the implacable force of destiny. This quintessentially epic theme echoes the sense of fatality which is so deeply anchored in the Iranian soul. And yet his characters are still men, torn and tortured by doubt and sensitive to the misfortunes of the age. They are to be pitied rather than condemned. Zahhak, the bloody tyrant, the symbol of cruelty, does not act freely; he has, after all, sold his soul to the devil. He is merely an instrument. As a great tragic epic poet, Ferdowsi thus creates terrible situations in which a man is led to kill his brother, or a father kills his son. Links of kinship add grandeur and resonance to the combat waged by the individual against higher forces.

The Epic of the Kings is still a living epic for Iranians because it is profoundly in tune with the Iranian soul. The Iranian peasant, even if he can neither read nor write, responds to the exploits of Rostam, the hero par excellence, and weeps to think of his sufferings when he is compelled to kill his own son to defend his country.

Neither good nor ill will last for ever: the finest thing is to leave good deeds to be remembered by.

Ferdowsi's voice still speaks to us across the ages. ■

Quotations from the *Shah-nama* in this article are taken from the translation by Reuben Levy which was published as *The Epic of the Kings* by Routledge & Kegan Paul (London, 1967) and features in the Unesco Collection of Representative Works. *Editor*

Above, an episode from ***The Epic of the Kings*** *in which the great folk hero Rostam slays the dragon with the help of his valiant horse Rakhsh. (15th-century miniature.)*

Ilya the invincible

BY HÉLÈNE YVERT-JALU

Ilya of Murom and Solovei the Brigand. A 19th-century example of the Russian folk art known as ***lubok.***

IN a famous painting by Viktor Vasnetsov, three valiant knights, breastplated and helmeted, mounted on powerful chargers, are shown guarding Russian soil against the enemy. Their names are Ilya of Murom, Dobrynia Nikitich and Aliosha Popovich, and they are the heroes of Russian *byliny* or epic poems.

The *byliny* tradition may go back to the end of the tenth century. In the large, bright hall of Prince Vladimir's palace at Kiev, minstrels accompanying themselves on the *gusli,* a kind of zither, sang of the extraordinary exploits of *bogatyrs* (gallant warriors), while cup-bearers filled the boyars' and other noblemen's glasses with "a blend of herbal wine and unchanging honey".

Heroes that live on

Since those times, *byliny* have been transmitted orally from generation to generation, an uninterrupted river of poetry in which many historical, social and geographical currents are mingled.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in the Arkhangelsk and Lake Onega regions of northern Russia, rustic bards known as *skaziteli* still related these heroic deeds. Usually men of a ripe old age, they used a special technique to recount their stories, keeping up a slow rhythm of three or four beats to the bar, which brought a majestic grandeur to the old songs. Woodcutters, fishermen and hunters would gather round, listening attentively.

Lovers of folk traditions have collected examples of this national treasure of historic songs. In the eighteenth century an Englishman, Richard James, was the first to transcribe some of them. Fuller collections which appeared in the following century met with tremendous success, and influenced literature (Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol), music (Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin), painting (Vasnetsov, Repin, Vrubel) and films such as Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky.* The popularity of these gallant warriors of legend has even influenced the spoken language. In Russian today, the word *bogatyr* designates a man of powerful stature or someone of exceptional vigour. These epic heroes, mythical figures in the national consciousness, have scarcely changed down the ages. Above all, they have kept the prodigious strength which enables them "to crush ten adversaries with one blow". Let us follow the exploits of Ilya of Murom, perhaps the most popular hero of the Kiev *byliny* cycle.

Ilya, a peasant's son, has been paralysed for thirty years (thirty-three in some versions), when one day three pilgrims pay him a visit. Twice they ask him to rise and offer them food and drink.

Even the most terrifying monsters quail before lion-hearted Ilya of Murom. This redoubtable hero of ancient Russia is still a much-loved figure of popular mythology.

"Alas," the cripple replies, "I can move neither arms nor legs." At the third demand, Ilya miraculously manages to stand up and walk. He offers a cup of wine to his guests, who ask him to drink of it too. He has barely tasted it when he feels within himself a Herculean strength. The three men then predict that Ilya will be a great warrior and that he will not die in combat, and they disappear. Thus the crippled Ilya suddenly becomes an invincible titan.

Like any Russian peasant of the Middle Ages, Ilya first uses his power to clear the surrounding forest. In the twinkling of an eye, he uproots all the oaks and hurls so many of them into the Dnieper that the course of the powerful river is dammed. He then heads for Kiev to defend Holy Russia, which is constantly under threat.

In order to procure a mount for himself, Ilya follows the instructions of the mysterious pilgrims. When he meets up with a peasant leading a small, shaggy stallion by the bridle, he immediately buys it. Then he walks the animal three times through the morning dew. It turns into a marvellous steed which "with each stride covers

Ilya of Murom (centre), Dobrynia Nikitich (left) and Aliosha Popovich (right), the three most popular knightly heroes or ***bogatyrs*** *of Russian epic poetry. Painting by Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1926).*

Illustrations from ***Ilya of Murom and the Tsar Kalin,*** *a cartoon slide show. Above, the terrible Tsar Kalin; below, Vladimir's daughter, the kind princess.*

a full *verst* (1.06 kilometres), leaping from hill to hill, over rivers, lakes and forests". Even better, it can speak and warn its master of imminent danger.

Before he reaches Kiev, Ilya engages in several combats, including a confrontation with Soloveï the Brigand. This "nightingale" *(soloveï)* is a strange and terrifying bird which has built himself a nest in the branches of seven oak trees at a crossroads in the forest. The bird's song bends the largest trees to the ground and strikes humans stone dead. Not a whit dismayed by this terrible sound, Ilya draws his bow and pierces Soloveï's right eye with an arrow. Soloveï falls from the nest and Ilya chains him to his stirrup. The monster's three daughters, perched in their father's nest, send their mates to attack Ilya. Soloveï asks them to negotiate a ransom for him instead. But their efforts are in vain, as Ilya disinterestedly refuses the precious gifts offered to him.

With his prisoner in tow he arrives at the prince's palace in Kiev, where Vladimir questions him. The *bogatyr* introduces himself and displays his captive. Vladimir invites Soloveï the Brigand to sing, but the monster will only obey Ilya. Thereupon Ilya repeats the request, with the proviso that the bird must sing only half as loudly as usual, in order to spare the prince and his courtiers. Soloveï mischievously sings as loudly as he can, sowing death and destruction. Vladimir is saved by the sable-lined coat with which he has covered his head. As a punishment for this act of disobedience Ilya cuts off the Brigand's head: "Thus Soloveï will no longer fill mothers' and fathers' eyes with tears or make widows of young women, and will cease to turn little children into orphans."

Ilya is appointed *ataman,* or chief of the Prince of Kiev's *bogatyrs,* and from then on guards the gates of the capital. One day he is challenged by a giantess armed with an immense club. She is a *polenitsa,* a wild beast that roams the steppe. Ilya emerges victorious from the terrible fight that ensues. On discovering that the giantess is his own daughter, however, he spares her life. But to avenge her mother, whom Ilya has deserted, she goes into his tent while he is sleeping and with all her might plunges a hunting spear into his chest. This would have been the end of Ilya, but the spear strikes the cross weighing a pud-and-a-half (a *pud* is over 16 kilos), that he always wears. Awakened by the noise of metal on metal, Ilya opens his eyes and tears the treacherous girl to shreds.

The homeland before the prince

The enemies which have to be fought, indiscriminately referred to as Tatars, are always depicted as caricatures. Idolishche the Pagan is "two sagens high and one wide" (a *sagen* is 2.13 metres). "His head is like an enormous vat, and his eyes are mugs of beer, and the nose on his face is a cubit's length."

Just out !

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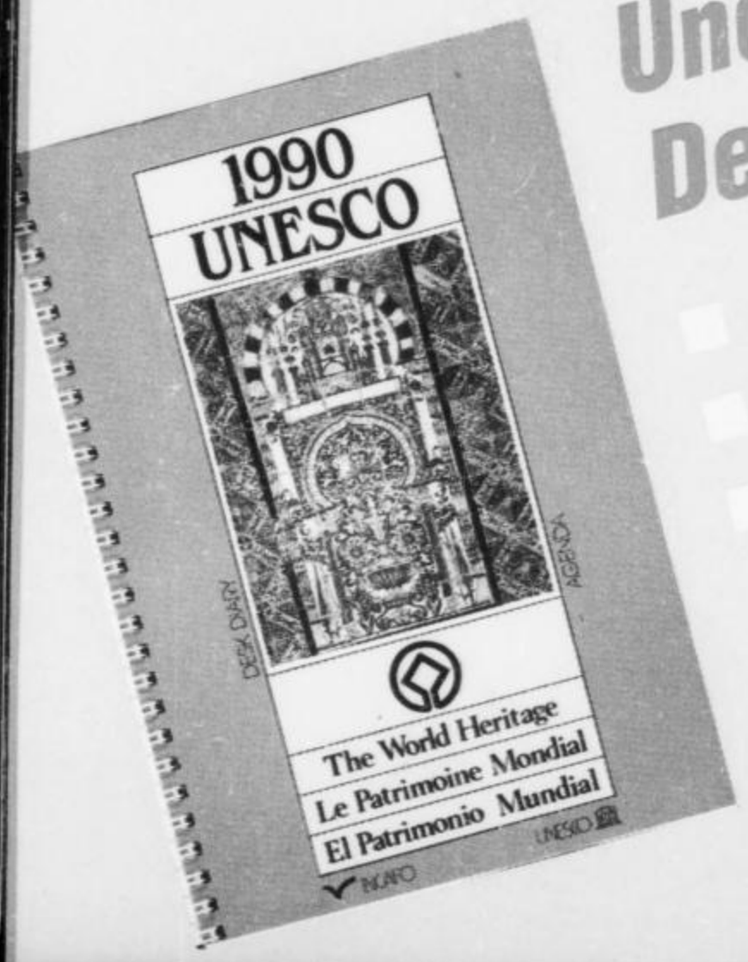

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Left, A Valiant Knight, by the Russian artist Mikhail Vrubel (1856-1910).

Aliosha Popovich, the wily companion in arms of Ilya of Murom. This hand-coloured engraving dates from the 18th century.

Facing the massed ranks of enemy armies—"all black, like black crows"—the prince's knights are often terror-stricken. Ilya alone proves himself to be a fervent and loyal defender of the homeland. Despite tempting offers from the enemy, he steadfastly refuses to leave the prince's service. He nonetheless has good reasons for doing so, as Vladimir, who bears little resemblance to the historical figure of the same name, often rewards the loyal services of his *bogatyrs* with ingratitude.

One day, after a quarrel with Ilya, the angry Vladimir has him thrown into a deep cellar with the order to let him starve to death. The other *bogatyrs*, indignant over this unjust treatment, desert the prince's court. Three years go by. Kalin, the tsar, turns the situation to his advantage and attacks Kiev with a formidable army. Vladimir grows afraid and his daughter advises him to go and set Ilya free. To his great surprise, the prince discovers that Ilya is still alive. The young princess has dug an underground passage leading to the dungeon, and each day has brought the prisoner sweetmeats. Vladimir throws himself at the hero's feet and begs him to save Kiev. Ilya agrees to fight "not for the prince, but for the churches of the Virgin, for Holy Russia, and for the widows and orphans".

One of Ilya's most characteristic traits is revealed in this episode: he serves the Russian land, not an occasionally despotic sovereign. This courageous and unselfish peasant with no false pride unhesitatingly speaks his mind when he sees the prince abuse his authority. When he is not angered or engaged in Homeric combat, he is a good-natured fellow who likes a joke. Ilya, the gallant knight, has become a kind of national hero. ■

HÉLÈNE YVERT-JALU, of France, is a lecturer at the University of Paris I. She is the author of a number of studies on social and cultural questions in the Soviet Union.

A unique source of contemporary information about Genghis Khan and the empire he founded, the Mongolian national epic blends folklore and legend with a vivid account of steppe society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The Secret History of the Mongols

BY SHAGDARYN BIRA

THE Secret History of the Mongols (Mongyol-un ni'uča tobča'an) is the earliest surviving literary monument of the Mongolian people. Its author is unknown, and although it is widely thought to have been written in 1240, both its original title and the exact date of its composition are still matters for debate.

What is beyond doubt is the fact that *The Secret History* is a historical and literary document of major importance. Not only does it recount the genealogy of the early Mongol khans and the life and times of Genghis Khan, founder of a unified Mongol state, it also paints a vivid and accurate picture of the nomadic Mongol way of life and provides rich source material for an understanding of Mongol society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Soviet Academician Boris Vladimirtsov has described *The Secret History* as a "history-chronicle" retold in epic style and "impregnated with the aroma of the steppe". A British scholar, David Morgan, has pointed out that whatever hesitations historians may feel about the work as a strictly accurate record of historical events, there can be no doubt that it provides a unique and authoritative insight into the way of life, patterns of thought and beliefs of the thirteenth-century Mongols.

Alan-qua, the legendary mother of the clan of Genghis Khan.

Genghis Khan, the warrior who united the Mongol tribes

The Secret History may be divided into three parts—a genealogy of the ancestors of Genghis Khan, stories about the life of Genghis Khan, and a short section on his son and successor Ogödei.

The first part records the legendary history of Mongolia as reconstructed from very ancient oral traditions—myths and legends, stories and accounts of historical events. It opens with the legend that the forefather of the Mongolian people was "a bluish wolf which was born having [his] destiny from Heaven above", whose "spouse was a fallow doe".[1] The image of the wolf appears in the mythology of many Eurasian peoples, closely connected with ancestor cults of the tribal chief or the founder of a clan.

The following well-documented genealogy of the Mongol khans exalts the glory of the "Golden Horde" and is the genealogical basis for studies of the early history of the Mongolian people.

The main theme is developed in the second part of the epic, in which legend and myth give way to more reliable historical data. Although the narrative continues in the epic style, it begins to assume the characteristics of a chronicle. An ancient Eastern system of chronology, based on a twelve-year animal cycle, is used to date events in the history of the numerous Mongolian tribes and their unification into a single state by Genghis Khan, the central figure of the story.

Genghis Khan is portrayed not only as a

Opposite page, Genghis Khan is shown receiving distinguished visitors in this Persian miniature illustrating Rashid al-Din's ***Jami at-tawarikh****, an important source for Mongolian history.*

Genghis Khan. Painting on silk of the Yuan period (13th-14th centuries).

legendary hero and warrior, the embodiment of the "steppe aristocracy", but also as a great political figure and statesman who decided by his "iron will" to put an end to the discord among the Mongol tribes, where anarchy prevailed:

The Heaven with stars
Was turning round about.
The many peoples were at strife.
Not entering into their beds,
They were spoiling one another.
The earth with crust
Was turning backward and forward.
The whole nation was at strife.

Although the main hero of the story is Genghis Khan, one of the greatest conquerors in world history, the author does not seem to attach great significance to his military campaigns against other countries, as if he had deliberately ignored that aspect of Genghis' career. On the other hand, he constantly stresses to readers and listeners the benefits and privileges to be enjoyed within a centralized Mongolian state.

The third, much shorter, part of *The Secret History* summarizes the reign of Ogödei (1228-1241), the second great khan of Mongolia. It is thought to be a later addition to the main text.

The cult of Light

A work of great literary merit, *The Secret History* is a unique phenomenon in the history of nomadic peoples. It has been compared to monuments of world literature such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* Alexander Romance literature, the French *Chanson de Roland,* and the Russian *Lay of Igor's Campaign.*

The Mongolian people lived at a crossroads of world communications and it would be a mistake to assume that such an epic could have been

Genghis Khan (left) and Ogödei, his son and successor.

created by them in isolation from other civilizations. The script in which it was written had its origins in Phoenician, Aramaic and Sogdian systems of writing. Close examination of the text reveals traces of religious and mythological concepts of ancient Oriental peoples, especially the influence of the Zoroastrian-Manichaean cult of Light. This cult is reflected in the Mongolian legend of the immaculate conception of Alan-qua, the foremother of Genghis Khan's clan, by the "Father-Light". Alan-qua recounts her experience in the epic:

Every night, a bright yellow man entered by the light of the hole at the top or [by that] of the door top of the tent and rubbed my belly. His light was wont to sink into my belly. When he went out, like a yellow dog he was wont to crawl out by the beams of the sun or moon.

Scholars have shown that some of the tales in *The Secret History* are of very ancient origin and have a close affinity with Central Asian and Eurasian legends. The following tale of the five arrow-shafts tied into a bundle, for example, recalls a story that was current among ancient Iranian peoples, particularly the Scythians:

One day, in the spring, while boiling the dried [flesh of] a sheep, making these her five sons...to sit in a row, she gave unto each [of them] a single arrow shaft, saying "Break [it]*!"...each [of them] brake and cast away. Again, she bound five arrow shafts together in a bundle and gave [them unto them], saying "Break [them]!" All five, holding, every person, the five arrow shafts bound in a bundle, were in turn not able to break...*

She said, "Ye, my five sons, were born of an only belly. If, like the five arrow shafts of a little while ago, ye be each alone, like those single arrow shafts, [ye] *will each [of you] easily be broken by any one. If together* [ye] *be of one purpose like those arrow shafts bound in a bundle, how will ye easily be [broken] by any one?"*

Plutarch tells how the Scythian king Skilur (second to first century BC) gathered all his sons around him before his death and asked each of them to break a bundle of darts. When they refused, the king broke the darts one by one, with the admonition that, united, his sons would be invincible.

SHAGDARYN BIRA, Mongolian historian, is a member of his country's Academy of Sciences. He has published many studies on the history and culture of medieval Mongolia, including a book on Mongolian historiography from the 13th to the 17th centuries which has been translated into Russian and Chinese.

A sourcebook for Oriental historians

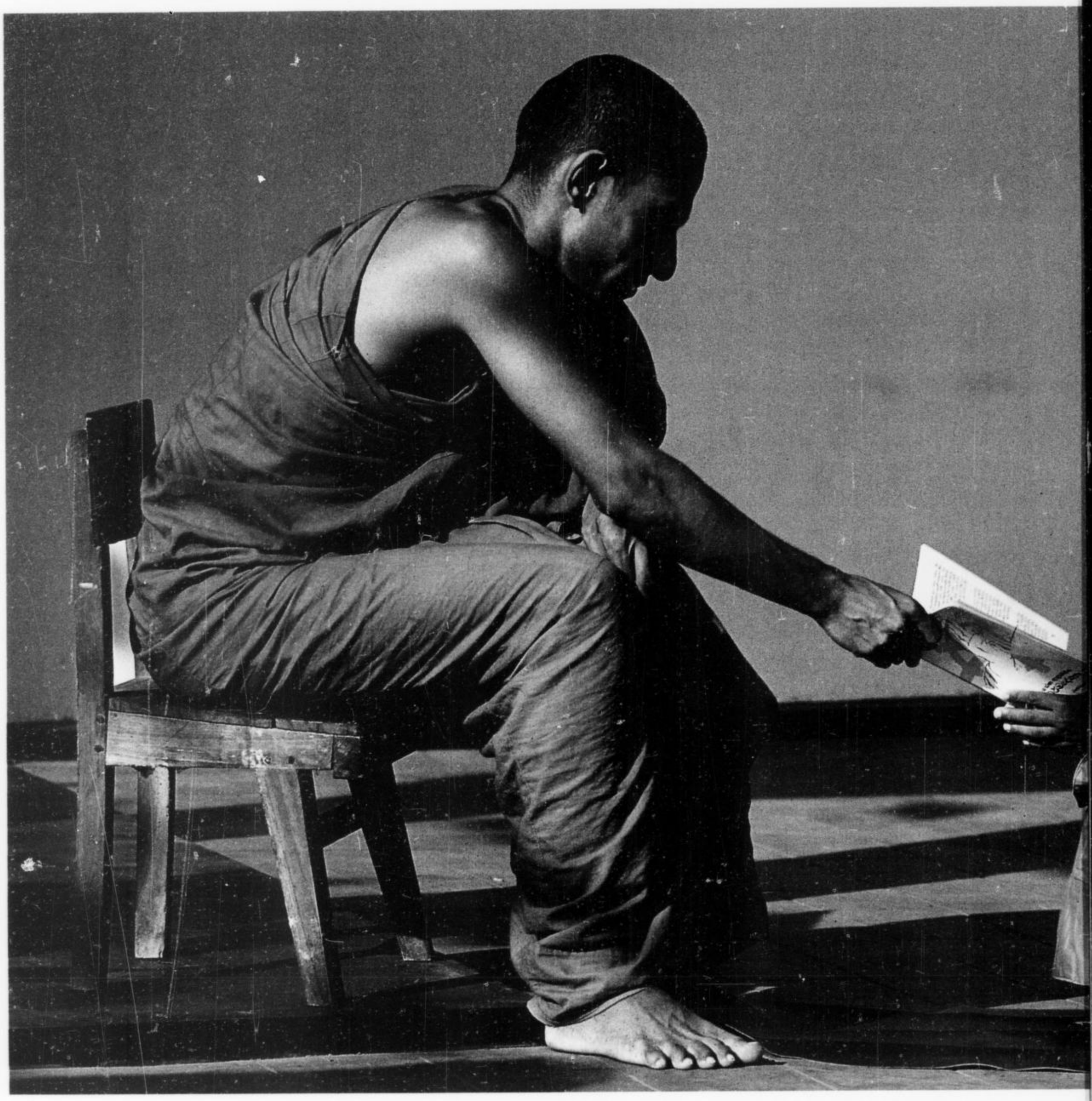
Ever since it was written, *The Secret History* has been known throughout the Orient, and for 750 years it has been one of the main sources for the history of other countries of Central Asia as well as Mongolia. It has been used as a source in fundamental historical works of the Orient such as *Jami at-tawarikh,* the universal history compiled by the Persian author Rashid al-Din (1247-1318), and the *Yüan shih* ("History of the Yüan Dynasty"), the famous Chinese chronicle of the Mongol empire in China (thirteenth to fourteenth century).

As a result of Rashid al-Din's work, most of the contemporary information recorded in *The Secret History* has been retold and reinterpreted in many important historical writings of Central Asian countries, including those of the Mughal empire in India.

The *Akbarnama,* the chronicle of the emperor Akbar and his ancestors written by the great Mughal historian Abu-l-Fazl (1551-1602), gives a detailed version of the Alan-qua story which compares Alan-qua with the Virgin Mary, raises her to the rank of Mother of God, and urges: "If you listen to the tale of Mary, believe the same of Alanguwa (Alan-qua)".[2] Abu-l-Fazl also does his best to prove that Akbar was descended from the legendary foremother of the Mongols.

The Secret History has also been esteemed in China as a valuable source for the history of the Mongolian people, and fourteenth-century Chinese bibliophiles actually helped to preserve the epic for posterity by transcribing into Chinese characters the original Mongol text, which has not survived, and by making verbatim and abridged translations. In 1866, a first Russian translation of *The Secret History* was made from the abridged Chinese version, and since then the Mongolian masterpiece has become available to the international academic community. ■

1. Quotations from *The Secret History of the Mongols,* Vol. I, translated into English and edited by Francis W. Cleaves. Harvard University Press, 1982.
2. From *The Akbarnama of Abu-l-Fazl,* translated into English by H. Beveridge, Delhi, 1972.



The ***Mahàvamsa*** *is a verse chronicle which paints a colourful fresco of Sri Lanka's early history. Ever since it was written in the sixth century by a Buddhist monk, it has been periodically updated.*

The *Mahàvamsa*, Sri Lanka's non-stop epic

BY ANANDA W. P. GURUGÉ

Left, a monk and his pupil at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Below, frieze on the stupa at Sanchi, India, depicts worshippers around the Bodhi-tree under which the Buddha was sitting when Enlightenment came to him.

IN the last twelve years a group of Sri Lankan historians and linguists have been meeting regularly in Colombo to write their nation's history. They are engaged on a remarkable project, for the history is being written in verse and in Pali, a classical Indo-Aryan language which is hardly used today except by the Buddhist clergy and a small circle of eminent international scholars.

The historians are bringing up to date Sri Lanka's national epic poem, the *Mahàvamsa* or "Great Chronicle", whose first thirty-seven chapters in nearly 3,000 Pali verses were composed by a Buddhist scholar-monk named Mahanama in the sixth century AD. Publication of the updated history is awaited with great interest in Sri Lanka.

The origins of the *Mahàvamsa* can be traced at least as far back as the fourth century BC. The Aryan settlers who had migrated to Sri Lanka from the Indus and Ganges basins of the Indian sub-continent possessed an exceedingly keen historical sense. They kept records of their exploits and experiences not merely as ballads or sagas of folk or literary interest but more systematically, as historical accounts seeking to assert their cultural identity as a new nation in a new land.

Monks who chronicled the exploits of heroes

The dynastic history of at least two centuries was already thus recorded before Buddhism was introduced in the third century BC. With the advent of Buddhist monks, Sri Lanka was assured of the continuing services of reliable and dedicated historiographers and custodians of its historical tradition.

Buddhism ushered in several centuries of intense literary activity. While the *Tripitaka*, the Buddhist Canon, was preserved in Pali (a literary form of the vernacular which the Buddha used in his discourses), the commentaries elucidat-

ing it were produced locally in Sinhala. The historical sections, known as *Sihala-Atthakatha-Mahàvamsa* ("The Great Chronicle of the Sinhala Commentary"), were periodically updated and comprised information drawn from a number of sources: early accounts, with mythical overtones, of waves of Aryan migrations; a detailed and possibly documented monastic tradition relating to crucial events in the history of Buddhism; royal records of secular and religious achievements in the form of registers of meritorious deeds accomplished for the benefit of the Buddhist faith on the one hand, and the general public on the other; panegyrics and heroic ballads which court poets and wandering minstrels had produced to entertain royalty and edify the population.

In keeping with the ancient Indian tradition, Sri Lanka recognized three categories of heroes: *Dharmavira* (heroes of righteousness), *Danavira* (heroes of liberality) and *Yuddhavira* (military heroes). Many heroes from each category had distinguished themselves in the history of the island, and tales about them had become part of the literary heritage.

An imperfect attempt to present this material entirely in Pali verse was made in the fourth century AD in an epic poem known as the *Dipavamsa* ("Island Chronicle") whose author is unknown. The imperfections of the *Dipavamsa,* which include grammatical, stylistic and linguistic inelegance, result from the fact that Pali had not yet become a literary language and from the technical problems involved in organizing material from different sources. Two centuries later, Mahanama overcame these difficulties and his *Mahàvamsa* became the epic poem par excellence of Sri Lanka.

The main literary value of the *Mahàvamsa* lies in its effective use of Pali verse to narrate the history of the nation in a straightforward style, with the expressed purpose of "generating the serene joy and emotion of the pious".

Excluding the introductory chapters on Buddhist traditions and history, the *Mahàvamsa* is organized as three epics in one:

- chapters six to ten: the *Vijaya-Pandukabhaya Epic* on the founding and consolidation of the Sinhala kingdom in Sri Lanka;
- chapters eleven to twenty: the *Devanampiyatissa-Mahinda Epic,* which tells of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and its consolidation as the state religion;
- chapters twenty-two to thirty-two: the

The temple at Anuradhapura, ancient capital of the Sri Lankan kingdom of the same name.

Pilgrimage to Mount Mihintale, Sri Lanka. Legend has it that Mahinda, son of the Indian emperor Asoka, alighted on the mountain around 250 BC when he came to preach Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Dutthagamani-Abhaya Epic about the national hero of the second century BC who reunified the kingdom by liberating the regions under foreign domination and left a lasting heritage of magnificent monuments to the glory of Buddhism.

Instead of singling out these themes for isolated treatment, the historian in Mahanama favoured a chronological narrative. Thus the *Mahàvamsa* became a chronicle. The format and style of the connecting chapters (i.e. chapters twenty-one and thirty-three to thirty-seven) and especially the last five chapters provided the prototype for all later prolongations of the *Mahàvamsa.*

25 centuries of written history

Including the current project described above, there have been as many as seven efforts since the thirteenth century to update the chronicle. As a result, Sri Lanka enjoys the distinction of being perhaps the only modern nation to have maintained an unbroken written history over twenty-five centuries. What makes this record exceptional is that its authenticity has been substantially established by archaeological, epigraphical and numismatic evidence and from external literary sources.

Notable though it is for literary merit and historical authenticity, the *Mahàvamsa* is essentially religious in character. The narration of the good and evil deeds of kings and other historical figures seems exclusively intended to draw a moral. Most chapters end with either an admonition or a reminder of a basic doctrine of Buddhism. The doctrines emphasized relate to impermanence, wholesome and unwholesome action, detachment and the proper use of wealth and power. True to his didactic role, Mahanama displays an admirable degree of impartiality and objectivity in assessing the careers and contributions of various rulers, including usurpers and invaders.

Notwithstanding the seriousness of purpose that is shown in recording the eventful history of a colourful people, the *Mahàvamsa* abounds in "human interest" episodes relating to a wide spectrum of human types. It reflects the noble and the mean, the wisdom and the foibles, the sublime and the ridiculous which characterize human behaviour at all times and in all societies. The fact that the epic deals with real people and not with fictional or depersonalized types adds to the insights it provides into the strengths and weaknesses of humankind.

Reconstructing the Indian past

The *Mahàvamsa* came to the attention of the international academic community in 1826 when the Pali and Buddhist scholar Eugène Burnouf translated it into French. His translation was not published, however, as George Turnour, an English civil servant resident in Sri Lanka, was in the process of publishing the original Pali text with an English translation. The *Mahàvamsa* was to be of considerable value in reconstructing the ancient history of India.

In the 1830s, the English Indologist James Prinsep, the Champollion of Indian epigraphy, deciphered the ancient Brahmi script and began to read the edicts and pillar inscriptions of an impressive historical figure whose name appeared in the inscriptions as "Devanapiya Piyadasi". No Indian literary record or historical tradition shed light on a ruler with such a name. Knowing that the Sinhalas of Sri Lanka had a well-developed historical sense, Turnour believed that their ancient literary works could help epigraphists and archaeologists. As he suspected, the *Mahàvamsa* established beyond any doubt that Devanapiya Piyadasi was Asoka, the third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, of whom the epic gives a full account as the foremost patron of Buddhism.

Background information provided by the *Mahàvamsa,* in addition to confirming Prinsep's readings of the inscriptions, proved to be vitally important for the pioneering research and discoveries of archaeologists in India. On the basis of evidence from the Sri Lankan epic alone, the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham was able to identify the names and ascertain the significance of a number of holy persons whose relics were enshrined by the emperor Asoka in the stupas at Sanchi and Sonari in central India. The *Mahàvamsa* and its predecessor the *Dipavamsa* contained detailed information about the missionaries sent to propagate Buddhism in Sri Lanka and elsewhere under Asoka's patronage. When identifying the events represented in the sculptured gateways of Sanchi, the German art historian Albert Grünwedel used the *Mahàvamsa*'s account of how Asoka sent to Sri Lanka a sapling of the Bodhi-tree under which the Buddha was sitting when Enlightenment came to him.

Last but not least, the *Mahàvamsa* has been indispensable to the archaeologists and historians of Sri Lanka for whom it has provided the chronological framework into which their discoveries can be fitted. Many monuments and reservoirs have been identified only by using information recorded in the epic. Confusions created by inaccurate popular lore have been resolved with the aid of the *Mahàvamsa* even before supporting epigraphical evidence was found. As many as 3,000 inscriptions hitherto studied could hardly have been dated and interpreted in any other way.

The efforts in international academic circles to unravel the mysteries of the *Mahàvamsa,* on the one hand, and the Sri Lankan project to bring it up to date on the other, demonstrate the lasting impact the epic has exercised over the centuries. One wonders whether the ancient scribes who kept palace records and the monks who synthesized them into a historical narrative could have had any idea of the distinction they were thus bringing to their motherland. ■

ANANDA W.P. GURUGÉ is Sri Lanka's ambassador to France and permanent delegate to Unesco, where he is a member of the Executive Board. He is a specialist in Asian and Buddhist cultures on which he has written several books, including *The Mahàvamsa: A New Annotated Translation with Prolegomena.*

An authentic historical figure who became a legend, Shaka Zulu has inspired many African writers.

Shaka Zulu, a living legend

BY KALAME IYAMUSE BOSCO

This engraving by James Saunders King is the only authentic portrait of Shaka, king of the Zulu.

SHAKA Zulu is an outstanding example of a historical figure who became an epic hero. In the epic of which he plays the central role, his birth, rise and fall are closely associated with those of the Zulu empire.

History relates how the Zulu were a small clan of the Ngunis, a Bantu people which migrated to southern Africa from the north around 1300 AD and settled in the Vaal regions east of the Drakensberg mountains. The migration trek of the Ngunis was led by Malendela, who had two sons, Quabe and Zulu. Little is known of Zulu except that he became the progenitor of the nation which bears his name. Chroniclers sum up his heritage in these terms: "He left the world cumbered with a grave and richer by a nation. And therein lie his monument and his fame. No feats, no follies, not one word of praise of him is recorded."

A great nation deserves to be born in more splendid circumstances, however, and this is why the epic of Shaka is so important. In it Shaka is attributed with achievements so towering that they qualify him to usurp from Malendela's son the role of father of the Zulu people.

Birth of a hero

Shaka was conceived during a pre-marital relationship, and his mother Nandi, a member of the Lengani royal family, only later became the third wife of his father Senzangakhona, king of the Zulu. Before his birth, the elders had declared that his mother was not pregnant but merely harboured *ishaka*, an intestinal beetle. This "beetle" later became an emperor.

This beginning of the legend, locating moral fault in the conception of Shaka as the root cause of his problems, is important for the structure of the epic in that it prepares for Shaka's odyssey of initiation. In fact, Shaka was not really an illegitimate son, since among the Zulu people premarital conception was only considered a crime among the lower strata of society. It was tolerated among the aristocracy and both Shaka's parents were aristocrats.

Shaka's early childhood was unhappy. His mother's name, Nandi, meant "the Sweet One", but she hardly lived up to it. Wilful, sharp-tongued and authoritarian, she was despised by many, including her husband. Her beauty and her inferior position in the Zulu royal house provoked a mixture of jealousy, hatred and scorn, and Shaka too was treated with derision. This hostility brought together mother and son. Shaka adored his mother and this bond was further strengthened when the two went into exile.

Banished by Senzangakhona, mother and child were badly received in Nandi's family. Their sufferings actually became much worse since a discarded wife had no place in the social hierarchy. In addition, a child, and especially a boy, belonged by priority to his father's clan. Shaka was made to feel the full force of his mother's humiliation. He was often scolded and beaten for no valid reason. Defended by nobody but his mother, he developed into a tough, self-reliant personality. He was said to have killed a hyena and saved the girl it was carrying off, and to have performed other youthful feats of bravery. Shaka was condemned to enter adulthood prematurely. From this point, the various oral and written renderings of the epic diverge.

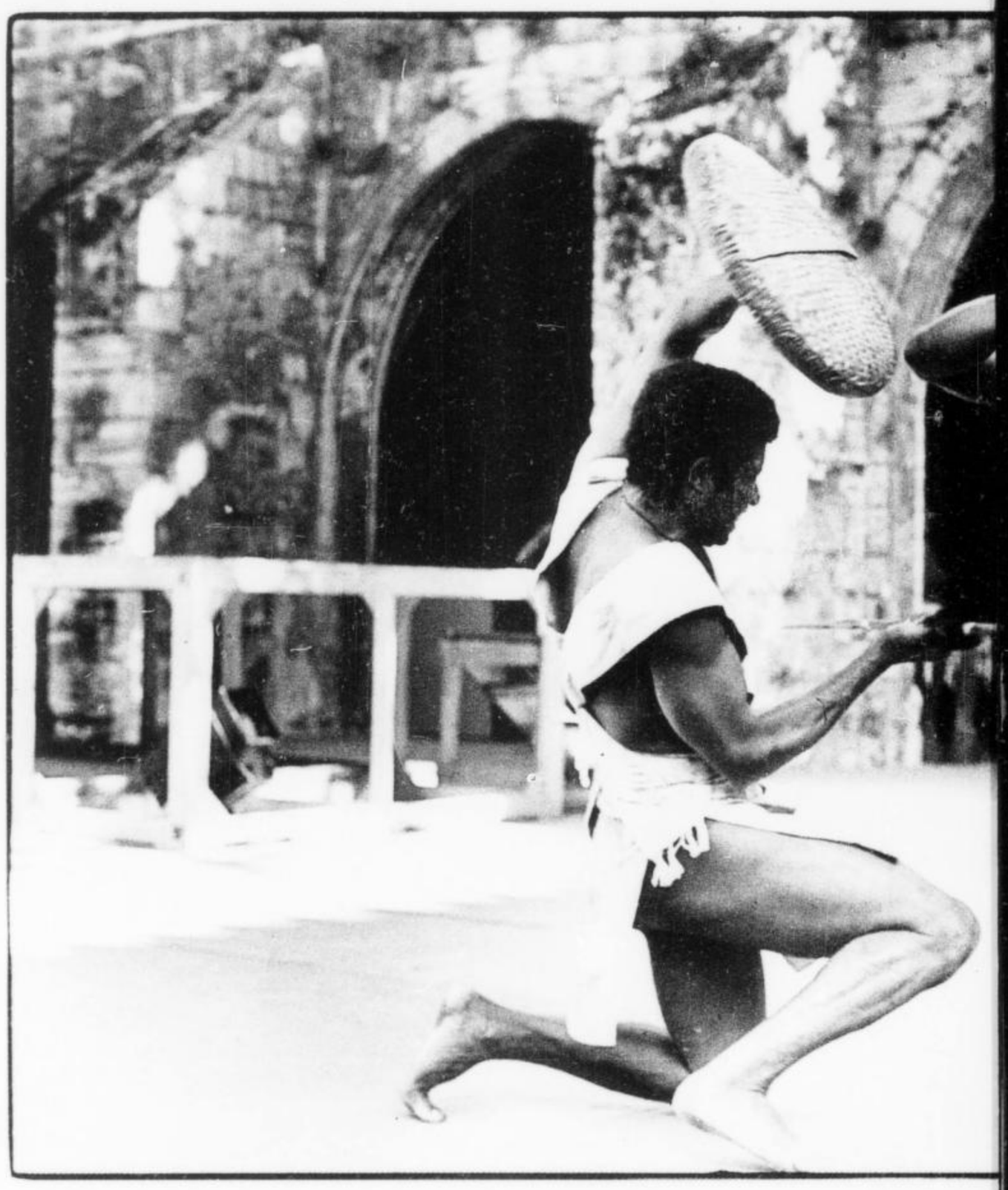
There are two major written versions. According to one, written by Thomas Mofolo in 1908, Shaka falls into the hands of Issanoussi, an all-powerful medicine man who helps him complete his initiation.

The second written version of the Shaka epic is a poetic rendering by Mazisi Kunene, who is himself a Zulu. This version is closer to the historical facts and to the Zulu literary tradition.* Unlike Mofolo, whose version of Shaka's exploits emphasizes the role of magic, fantasy and supra-human forces, Kunene dwells more on Shaka's political, military and visionary qualities. He takes us directly from Shaka's childhood to his military apprenticeship under his protector and mentor, Dingiswayo, the enlightened king of the Bathethwa, in whose army Shaka becomes a recruit.

The rise of Shaka

Shaka's intelligence soon brought him to the attention of Dingiswayo. Above all he distinguished himself as a skilled military leader with ideas which would revolutionize the art of war. He advocated the use of the short, wide-bladed stabbing spear instead of the long throwing spear, claiming that a soldier who threw his spear not only disarmed himself, but also armed his enemy. The long spear was also cumbersome and ineffective in close combat. According to Shaka, a good soldier should be a well-trained professional, hardened and experienced in the techniques of combat. Dingiswayo listened to his proposals and gave him the command of a group of young volunteers who soon proved far superior to all

* Originally written in the Zulu language, Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great* has been published in English as part of the Unesco Collection of Representative Works by Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. (1979). Its publication has not yet been authorized in South Africa in its original form.



the other troops. Shaka also did away with the leather sandals that not only reduced the soldier's speed but also made his feet soft and vulnerable. His soldiers toughened their unshod feet by dancing on hard ground littered with thorns.

Shaka then tried to impress on the soft-hearted Dingiswayo the idea that an enemy should either be completely destroyed or forced to declare allegiance to him, and that the art of war should be geared to this goal. To this end Shaka proposed the use of a "cow-horn" formation in battle. Three divisions should be engaged in battle. The bulk of the army should make a frontal attack with fresh reserve forces at the rear. The other two divisions should lie in wait, one on the left and the other on the right. Once the enemy was engaged in the frontal attack, the other two divisions should close in, encircle him and cut off his retreat. Dingiswayo was reluctant to put these revolutionary ideas into practice, and Shaka had to be patient.

The return to Zululand

Shaka's glory could not be complete until he returned to Zululand as legitimate heir to his father's throne. Before his death, Senzangakhona had named the cowardly leader Sigujana as his heir. With the blessing of Dingiswayo, Shaka marched to claim control over Zululand. His venture was successful. At the head of his invincible regiment and flanked by his two trusty lieutenants Mgobhozi and Mqoboka, Shaka entered his father's royal palace and ushered in a new era.

He was now in a position to put his revolutionary military and political ideas into practice. Bound by respect and loyalty towards Dingiswayo, he waited for the latter's death before pursuing expansionist policies. When Dingiswayo was slain by Zwide, the dreaded king of the Ndwandes, Shaka waged war against Zwide.

He lured Zwide's army into a trap by making a tactical retreat which enabled him to gain better fighting ground and to wear out his enemy through fatigue and famine. Zwide's army depended on provisions collected or looted in the battle areas, whereas Shaka had formed a brigade of young men to look after the provisioning of his forces during mobile warfare. Since Shaka had previously devastated the zones along which he lured the enemy, Zwide's army inevitably succumbed to starvation. His army destroyed, Zwide is said to have disappeared in the open mouth of a mountain and to have been carried along an underground stream to the land of the evil dead.

Having conquered the strongest of his adversaries, Shaka now began to strengthen and expand his empire. He had already formed regiments on the basis of age: the *uFasimba*, a brigade of sixteen- to twenty-year-olds, the *isimPholo* (the "bachelors' brigade" of twenty- to thirty-year-olds) and the *amaWombe* (the "battlers", comprising married men up to forty years old).

In Shaka's empire, hierarchy was based on merit. More than ever before he made heroism a central part of the Zulu ethos. A recognized hero exercised greater political authority than a born prince. Later this caused conflicts between him and his brothers, but it was a guarantee of equal opportunities for all who served under him. Anyone who defended the interests of the Zulu nation became Zulu, and it is often said that most of his generals and close comrades were not of Zulu descent.

Shaka's death was the result of heinous intrigues by his envious brothers, Dingane and Mhalangana, with the complicity of Mbopha, his army commander. His death is seen by many African authors as the ultimate betrayal and the

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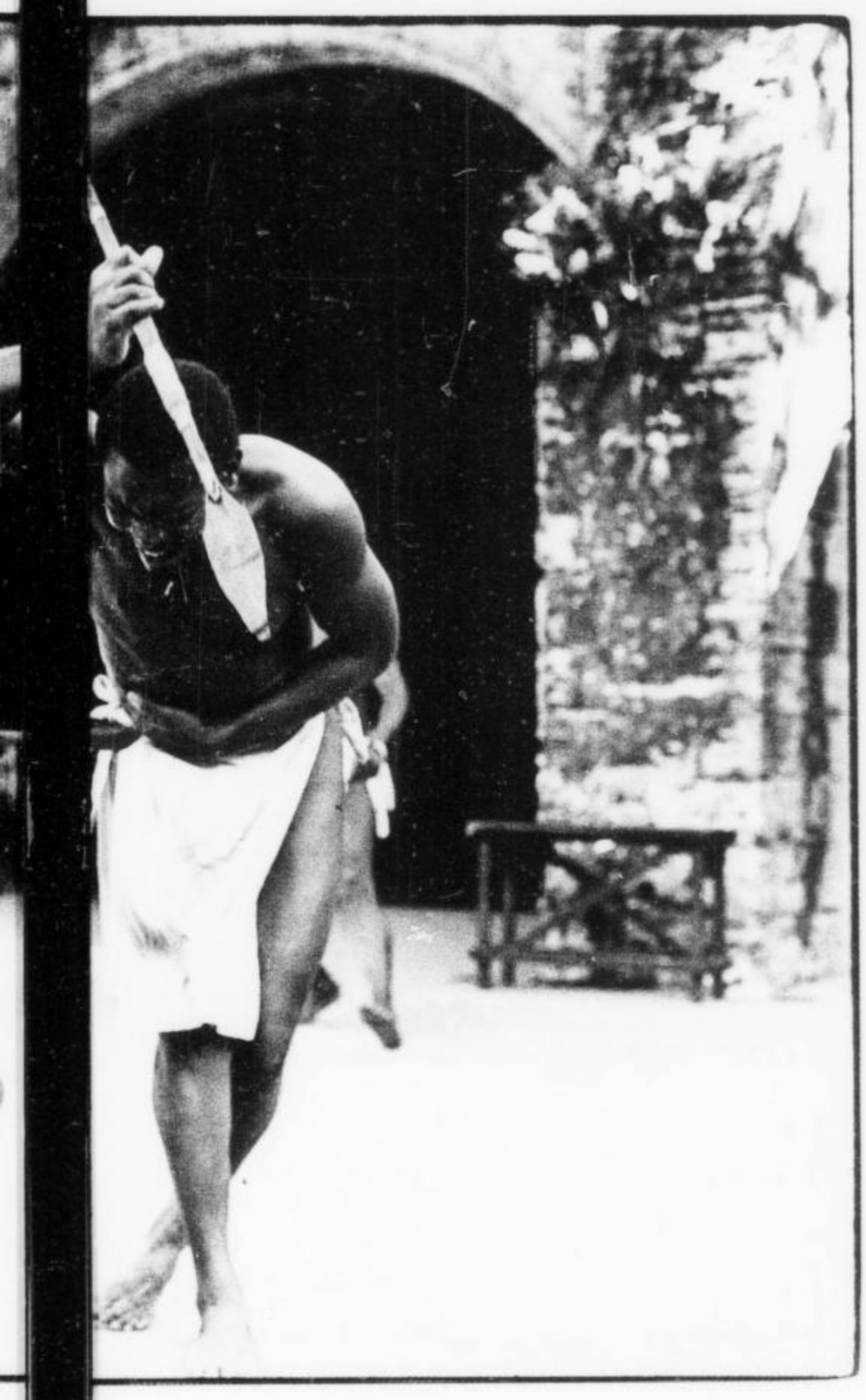
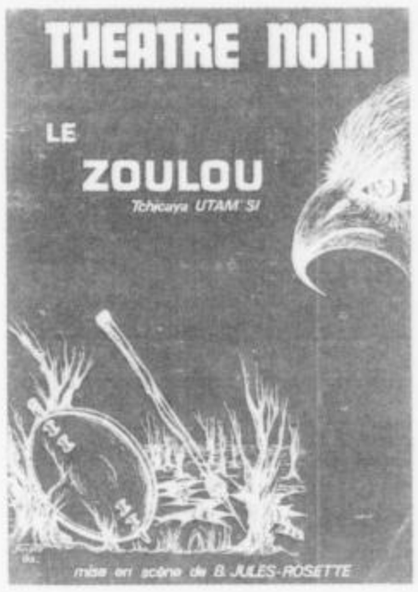
is a Ugandan writer based in Paris. His doctoral thesis, on order and chaos in the African novel, will be published shortly.



Poster and scene from a 1976 production of ***Le Zoulou****, by the Congolese playwright Tchicaya UTam'Si, at the 30th Avignon Festival, France. The play was performed by Théâtre Noir, a troupe of African and West Indian actors.*

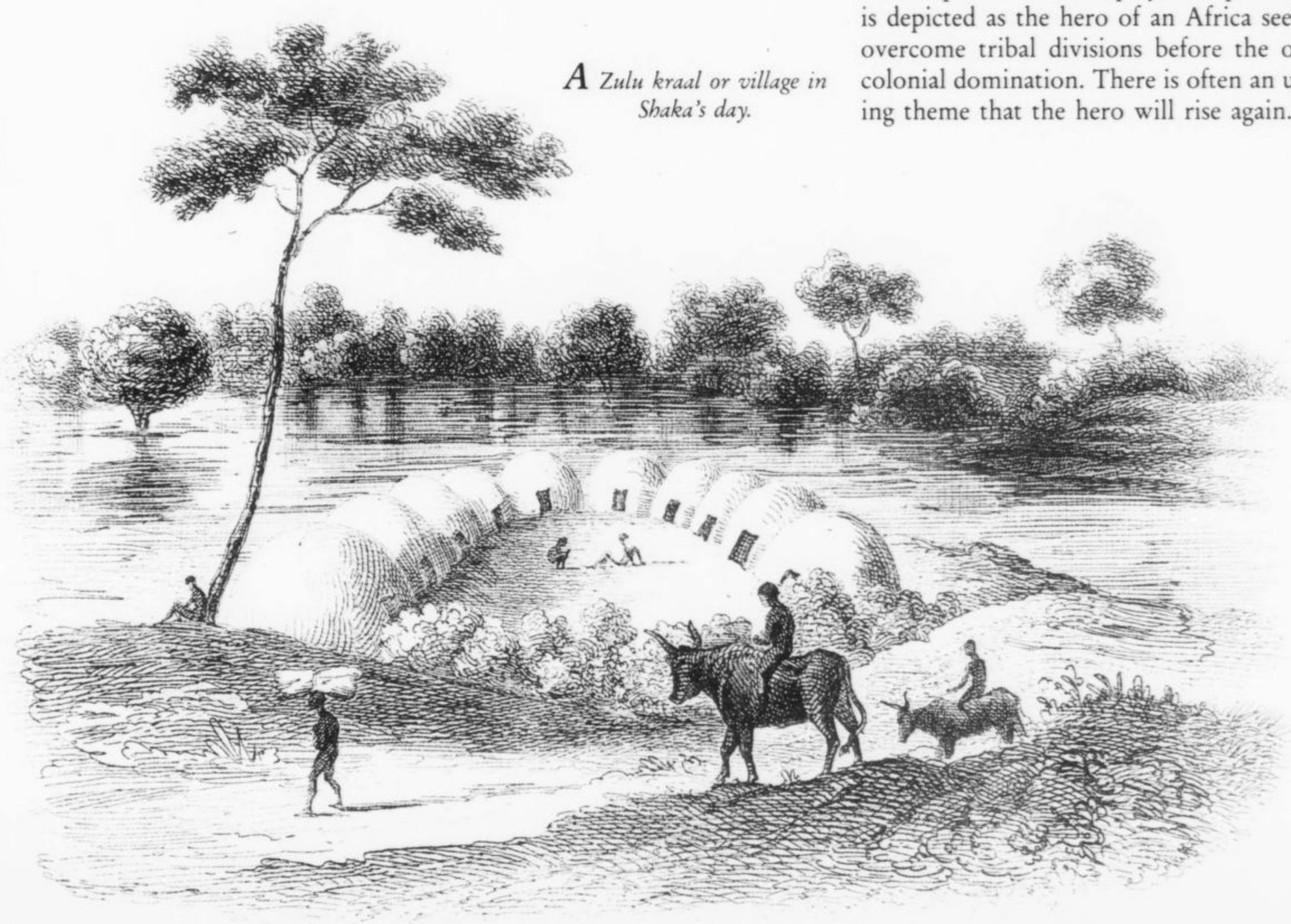


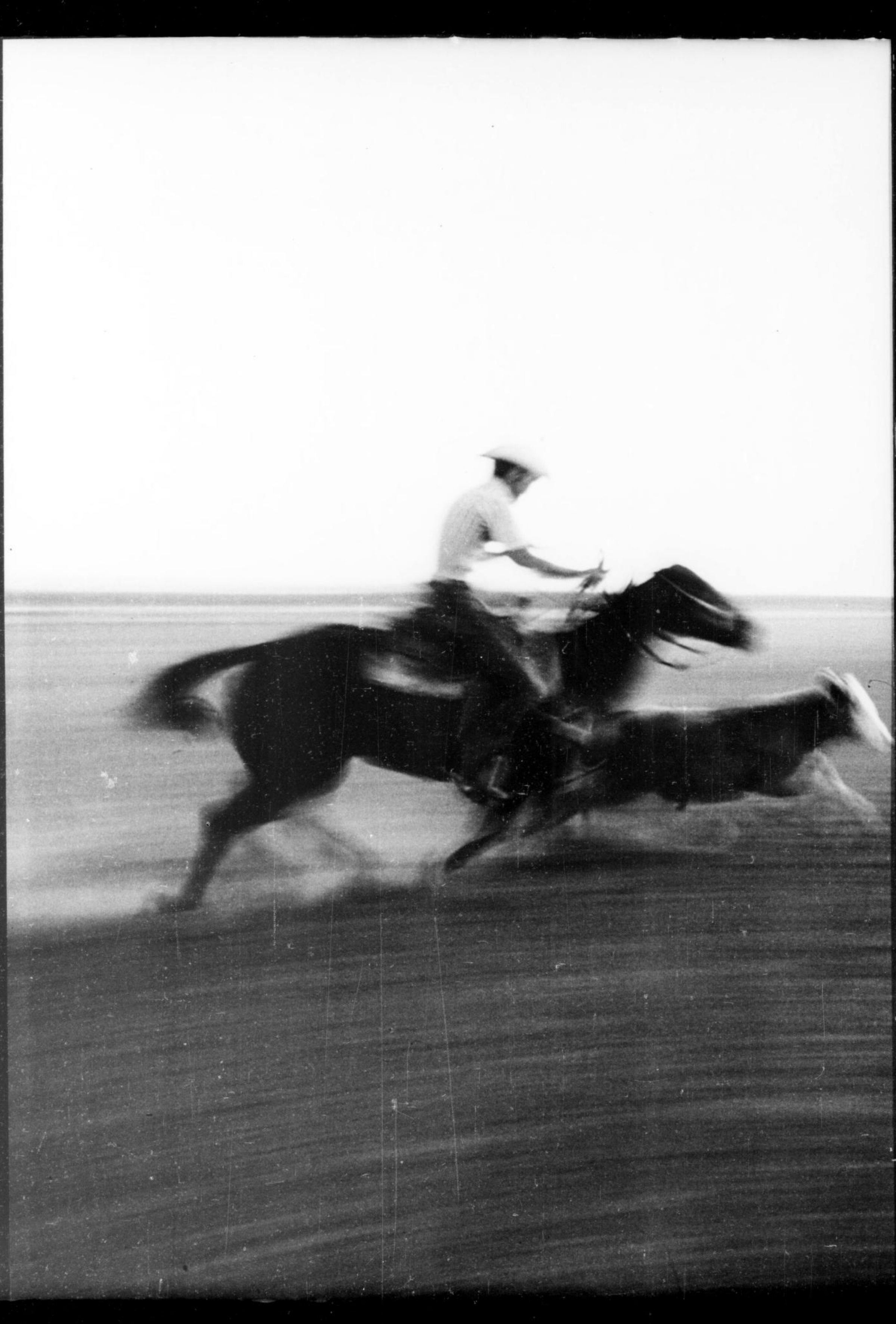
murder of a Christ-like figure. The two brothers leapt from their hiding place and stabbed him from behind. Mbopha struck at the astonished Shaka from the front as he fell. Afraid that he would rise again, the three assailants continued stabbing at him furiously even after he was dead. They then placed guards around his corpse in case he should rise from the dead.

Just before his death the visionary Shaka is said to have pronounced the words: "So, my brothers, you are killing me? And you, Mbopha, son of Sithayi! You think you shall rule Zululand after my death. No, you shall never rule over it."

Shaka is a figure of the pre-colonial era, which colonial historians have often endeavoured to reduce to a subsistence level of village exploits. His image is a challenge to this prejudice. African poets such as Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and playwrights such as Zambia's Twanyanga Mulikita have composed works inspired by the Shaka epic. In all these plays and poems, Shaka is depicted as the hero of an Africa seeking to overcome tribal divisions before the onset of colonial domination. There is often an underlying theme that the hero will rise again. ■

A Zulu kraal or village in Shaka's day.





Knights of the Far West

BY GARY N. GRANVILLE

The cowboy starred in epics which unfolded on cinema screens the world over. Has this modern knight on horseback ridden into the sunset for the last time?

The Sioux chief Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill (William Frederick Cody, 1846-1917) in a spectacular show which dramatized life in the Wild West.

Poster for a western featuring the American actor Tom Mix and his famous horse, Tony. In films Tom Mix portrayed the decent cowboy, committed to the struggle for justice.

NO myth is more widespread or more deeply woven into the fabric of contemporary culture than that of the western. As the twenty-first century approaches, it is striking that a historical phenomenon over a hundred years old should still be so fresh and alive. The behaviour patterns, aspirations, styles of dress, and even the kind of food depicted in westerns have become familiar models for people the world over to dream about.

Blue jeans, the cowboy's trademark, are the most popular garment on earth. And clothing, surely, is the most visible emblem of the image of themselves people want to project. Hundreds of millions of would-be cowboys walk around in jeans. Why has the western had such a universal impact? Two of the main reasons would seem to be the archetypal power of the myth, and the technological and cultural background of the twentieth century.

From knight to cowboy

The cowboy is the democratic heir of the mythical knight in shining armour. He evokes and adapts for the modern public the countless legends that have grown up through the ages, all over the world, around the taming of the horse.

The chivalrous knight is someone who masters his animal nature, thereby raising himself above other men. He is more powerful, more mobile and freer than they. He shoulders the noble responsibility of restoring justice and defending the weak and the oppressed. But he is vulnerable, because if he wavers and falls from grace, he has a long way to fall. He is lonely, too, for not everyone can become a knight. The attraction of the myth of the chivalrous knight is rooted in the twofold dream we all harbour, of achieving self-control and meting out justice. For a long time the fulfilment of this dream was beyond the reach of most of us.

Then, with the American and the French Revolutions, the great principle of human equality came to the fore and transformed ways of thinking. The ideal of the western was the perfect substitute for an over-élitist myth. The dignity and freedom of the knight were now within the grasp of everyone, at least in imagination. A figure from the New World, the cowboy, was grafted onto an ancient myth, ready to captivate the whole world.

The Golden Age of the Far West

Then along came the cinema, an invention that has had inconceivable repercussions. Like Gutenberg's printing press, it revolutionized communications. It propagated the same dreams to a worldwide audience. As early production and distribution techniques were cumbersome and expensive, only a limited number of films were available to an ever-widening public.

The sheer size of the American market meant that the United States would play a dominant role in world cinema: films whose costs had already

Right, three knights on horseback (15th-century French miniature). Left, Buffalo Bill depicted on the cover of a Spanish illustrated magazine.

been recouped at home could be exported at prices that defied all competition. Add to this the extraordinary popularity of American films, and the result was that the whole world began to see the same films and to share the same cinema landscape.

In response to the production needs of a rapidly increasing output, the American film industry set up in California, where there is sunshine practically all the year round. Film-makers need décors as well as light and actors—and California has plenty of outstanding natural locations, ideal for westerns.

The advent of television meant that the myths vehicled by the American cinema reached an even wider audience. The whole planet began to tune into the Hollywood wavelength. But it was the Far West, without a doubt, that most strikingly captured the popular imagination.

Adventure in the wide open spaces and permanent confrontation with danger gave a man the opportunity to reveal the best (or the worst) of himself, to go beyond the frontiers of civilization and escape from its reassuring but repressive grip. What a thrilling experience for modern man, confined to a world of daily routine and mundane hopes, ground down by conventions and constraints!

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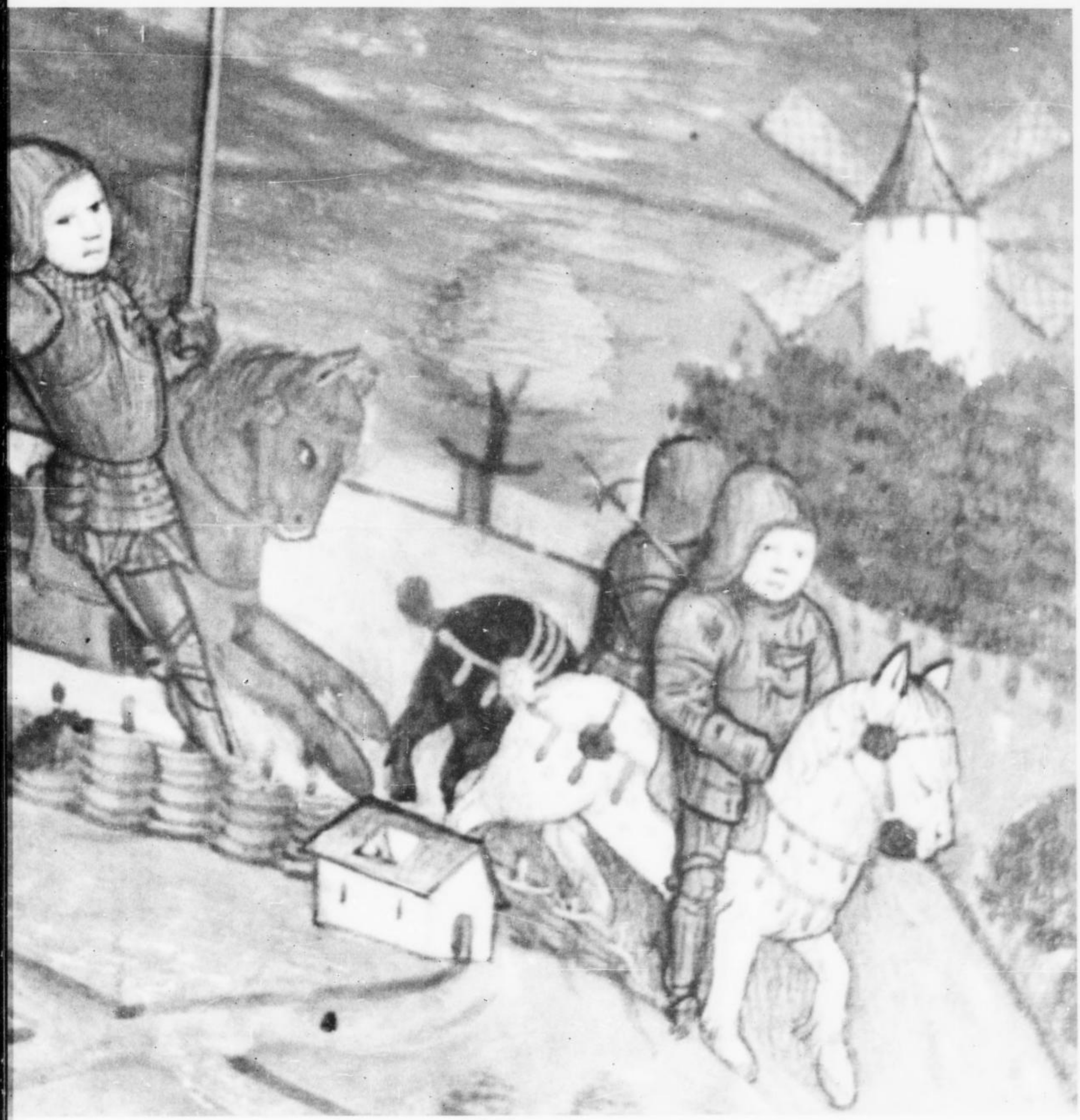
The end of a myth?

But the values underlying this myth were slowly turned upside down. The form remained the same, but the content changed. The ideal became the anti-hero, not the hero. The search for individuality and liberty, the rebellion symbolized by the western, persisted, but there was a shift in one of the myth's intrinsic values: belief in divine justice. This virtually universal idea presupposes that harmony, if disturbed, always re-establishes itself, in human society as in the cosmos. Order triumphs over disorder. This notion is expressed in the Oriental "karma", in the West's "as you sow so shall you reap".

This concept of justice had always been an integral part of the scenario (the cavalry which always arrives in the nick of time), or a presupposition of the narrative (crime doesn't pay). Just as the knights of old defending a just cause invariably came out victorious from the "judge-



ment of God", it was impossible for the "bad guy" to draw his gun before the "good guy" in their ritual duel.The idea that the forces of good always win in the end gave the myth its transcendent quality. It is perhaps no coincidence that the sheriff's badge is a six-pointed star, like Solomon's seal, a symbol of equilibrium and wisdom.

Until the 1970s, then, audiences delighted in the triumph of order, which reaffirmed their faith in justice, honesty, in short, in all the great moral values. Then ways of thinking changed and these values were challenged. Everything was called into question, even myths.

The systematic and sometimes naive moral stance commended to us by the American cinema, particularly in westerns, was no longer in tune with modern thinking. A reaction was inevitable. The idea of divine justice and the stereotyped hero were less clearly defined. In recent years most westerns have been pastiches of the mythical West or have set out to demystify it. Now the outlaw is defended, even glorified, and there is a feeling that the other traditional adversaries, the Indians, can no longer be seen as the bad guys. The keynote is realism, sometimes even squalor. The solitude of the cowboy has become selfishness, his dignity has become a form of provocation. The legendary cowboy no longer exists. By a curious coincidence, he died around the same time as John Wayne. ■

Mapping the human genome

BY JACQUES RICHARDSON

Biologists embark on a vast new international project to identify and locate every human gene.

BIOLOGISTS, aided by mathematicians, engineers, computer specialists and a variety of industrial researchers, began last January a generation-long effort to trace and identify every gene and related material representing the human body's "blueprint". This analysis of our biological architecture is called the human genome study—"genome" meaning how a living organism is assembled in its finest details.

The research is expected to require between fifteen and thirty years of investigation, costing perhaps between $3,000 and $4,000 million. Sir Walter Bodmer, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, calls the genome plan the "most exciting" of all the current, large-scale international research ventures.

Why so much costly effort, and for what purpose? One reason is that, after a century of intensive biological research, we still do not understand precisely how the body is built and works (or sometimes fails to). We still need to learn the complete instructions for "making a human being", how these are communicated through all the body's cells to the various tissues and vital organs—brain, heart, liver and so forth—and why some instructions go wrong.

A second reason is that, once we have understood how the genome is constructed and functions, we should be able to take appropriate precautions or corrective steps to deal with errors in the system: disease and disability. Medicine and public health are thus expected to benefit enormously from the new knowledge. We should then be able to resolve, thirdly, some of the many mysteries of human heredity. A fourth goal is to save some of the endangered biological species facing possible extinction.

Not counting the blood's red cells, your body or mine contains between 10 million million and 100 million million cells, so that each cubic centimetre of living tissue contains many millions. Each microscopic cell has its own smaller nucleus, within which the "instructions for living" are coded along an extremely long DNA molecule. DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, is the basic genetic puzzle solved in 1953 by three researchers, Francis Crick, Rosalind Franklin and James Watson.

The animal organism's cells combine their structures to form increasingly large and complicated components—so that cell biology is now more and more important for us to be able to understand:

- how oxygen helps decompose and absorb food
- how protein (essential in diet) is manufactured
- the role of water in transporting calcium and sodium
- how cells reproduce
- why cells fall ill, and
- why these various mechanisms exist in so many combinations that each of us possesses undisputed uniqueness of body and mind.

THE GENE, THE BASIC UNIT OF BIOLOGICAL INHERITANCE

The cell's nucleus, the very hub of the living universe, houses 46 chromosomes upon which is distributed the DNA architectural information. This very long-chained substance has four nitrogen-based components called adenine (A), thymine (T), cytosine (C) and guanine (G). Depending on how the A, T, C and G are linked, they join to form proteins. We call that portion of DNA linkage which issues the commands to make an entire protein a *gene*.

The genes next combine by thousands to form the 46 chromosomes cited: 23 pairs of them. Because the chromosomes constituting each pair are somewhat different, these miniscule differences serve as markers to identify the constituent genes. In reproduction, a father and a mother contribute a gene corresponding to every chromosome pair found in their offspring. It is the combination of the similarities and differences that make each of us male or female, tall or short, black-haired or blond, dark-skinned or light, prone to disease (and which ones), long-lived or otherwise, mentally alert or handicapped, musical, manually dexterous, sports-minded, and so on.

In terms of poor health, for example, chromosome pair no. 3 is already known to bear the "disease genes" for maladies such as certain protein deficiencies, intolerance to some sugars, a tendency to develop kidney-cell cancer, an inability to process thyroid hormone, or difficulty in breathing.

But the exact location of the offending gene or genes is difficult to establish because it is tucked somewhere along what is a very long chain indeed. One has to imagine a piece of cord 1 cm in diameter, but 10,000 km long! This is the nature of the challenge facing the genome explorers.

GENE THERAPY TO CURE DISEASE

What happens after much of the biological sleuthing is accomplished? Remember the second reason, listed above, for all this effort: to improve medicine and public health. Here is how "gene therapy" could be put to work to cure someone with a medical problem centred, for example, in bone marrow. The technique described is already familiar to *Courier* readers (see March 1987 issue) as that of recombinant DNA, in use today in some plant and farm-animal biotechnology and in the pharmaceutical industry.

The appropriate gene (embedded in some surrounding DNA) is taken from

a healthy donor, then "spliced"—via a microscopic chemical method—to a specially prepared virus. The virus is permitted to "attack" one of the defective cells removed from the patient afflicted with bone-marrow disease. The infecting virus then inserts the normal gene, as part of the DNA material the treated virus has brought with it, into the DNA of the receiving cell. Finally, the manipulated or engineered bone-marrow cells are returned to the patient, where they reproduce and become an entire population of healthy bone-marrow cells. The patient is now well.

Before the genome researchers attain this degree of scientific discovery, however, there are other factors to be considered. Hence, the length of time required for research. Even the experts cannot be sure, for instance, of how many genes might exist. Victor McKusick of the Johns Hopkins University in the United States has advanced a low estimate of 50,000, although 100,000 may prove to be the case once all identification has been completed. So far, less than 5,000 genes have been given labels and only 1,500 of these have been located accurately on their host chromosomes.

Another factor is that the success of the undertaking will lie in its application to men and women everywhere. Both the research and its expected results are burdened, furthermore, with disturbing ethical problems. Who will establish the authority to perform genetic interventions? (France has led the way; President François Mitterrand has created a special bio-ethical commission, at national level, chaired by blood specialist Jean Bernard.) What might be the technique's effects in terms of law and justice (on whom might the technique not be used)? How can everyone, regardless of social or economic position, be assured of access to the new therapies?

The international Human Genome Organization, known familiarly as HUGO, a non-profit professional association registered in Switzerland and headed by Professor McKusick, will meet in October of this year under the sponsorship of the American weekly magazine *Science*. The experts will apportion research tasks among almost 300 workers from nearly fifty countries, prepare to reconstruct important early biological phases in man's prehistory (before records were kept), search for genes involved in immune-response mechanisms—such as the deficiencies leading to AIDS, and try to identify genes responsible for growth disorders and such devastating illnesses as cystic fibrosis or Huntington's chorea (a type of degeneration of the brain and nervous system).

The HUGO experts include French Nobel prize-winner Jean Dausset, Michio Ito of the University of Tokyo, and Hans Zachau of the University of Munich. They hope to achieve major results by the year 2005, calling upon not only molecular and cell biologists throughout the world but also on the fast computing machines available chiefly in the industrialized countries.

Unesco's Director-General, Federico Mayor, a biochemist, has appointed a special consultant to assist in the co-ordination of the basic research under the aegis of United Nations agencies and throughout the global scientific family. He has also called directly on the resources of the Unesco-affiliated International Cell Research Organization, the Microbiological Resource Centres, and the International Brain Research Organization. ■

***Genetic Message* (1985), by French artist Nicole d'Agaggio.**

JACQUES G. RICHARDSON
was editor of Unesco's international quarterly journal *Impact of Science on Society* from 1972 to 1985.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

Interview with Jean-Claude Carrière

The *Mahabharata*, the Great History of Mankind

but we never lose the central theme of a looming threat, to which everything starkly points. We are living in a time of destruction. The question is, can we avoid it?

What guidelines did you follow in making your adaptation of the work?

Our first preoccupation was to avoid sacrificing any of the levels of the work. The *Mahabharata* says that Krishna is one of the avatars of Vishnu. Some of the characters believe this, others do not. In India there have always been divergent views on this. For a marxist, Krishna is a phantasm, for a *rishi,* a Hindu holy man, he is a god. We take no sides in the argument since we must eliminate no viewpoint on the basis of this or that a priori judgement. The uncertainty expressed in the original work has to be respected, that's all. Some members of our audiences must be able to see divinity in Krishna; others must be allowed to doubt it.

Very often in the *Mahabharata* Krishna does not know what is going to happen. How can this be? As a god is he not omniscient? I had a discussion on this point with Shankaracharya, one of the great living holy men of southern India. I put the question to him in a number of different ways, but he eluded it good-humouredly. I asked him how it could be that, during a battle, Krishna did not know what was happening on the battlefield as a whole, and that he could be surprised and even worried. Could a god or a man-god have human weaknesses? To which Shankaracharya replied with a smile and said something like: "It is a human weakness to think so."

When you began writing, did you start at the beginning of the poem?

No, I started making a patchwork, by writing certain scenes. In the *Mahabharata* there are a number of set pieces or obligatory scenes, such as the one in which Kunti confesses to Karna that she is his mother. I knew that sooner or later I would have to write scenes such as this. However, there were other sequences that were in the form of narrative in the original and which would have to be turned into scenes by creating dramatic situations, confronting one character with another and seeing if anything emerged. A good third of the scenes in the play are not scenes in the original poem.

I began, like a dancer, with the set pieces, while still trying to find the right forms of expression. It took a long time. I wrote the first scenes either in Paris or in India. I read them immediately to Peter Brook, to our close collaborators and to our musicians when they were there. I remember having read scenes in airports between two flights, and one evening in Madras, in a taxi caught in an interminable traffic jam. That is how our *Mahabharata* came into being, in dribs and drabs, written sometimes on a grubby paper tablecloth in a café. When I read them out, I could sense whether the scenes worked, what should be kept in, what should be left out and what would have to be reworked.

The time came when I had a first draft of all the set pieces. I then turned to the others, those that had to be invented, and this was much more difficult. Peter asked me to take part in the auditions with the actors, to go through a three- to four-page scene with them as if I myself was an actor. For Peter and his assistant it was a way of auditioning both the actors and the scene. So I had to take the plunge. That way you have a much better idea of what works and what doesn't work. There were scenes that I wrote straight off, in ten minutes, in which not a word was changed. Then there were others that I wrote and rewrote twenty-five times without ever achieving a perfect result.

Finally, there was a really harrowing period. The opening date for the show was already fixed, auditions were starting for the actors and I still had not found an overall structure to hold the whole play together. There was a story, related in a series of scenes, but how could all these scenes be made to hang together? I still hadn't found the solution.

We were only four months away from the date fixed for the first rehearsals. I decided to take a break in the south of France, in the country house of some friends of mine. There, for the only time in my life, something quite indescribable happened to me, something one reads about in books without really believing it: inspiration.

It was three o'clock in the morning. Normally I sleep well, but that night I couldn't sleep. There was something on my mind. Suddenly, and I couldn't tell you how it happened, I saw the first twenty minutes of the play, from which everything else would follow.

It was the dialogue between the child and the old storyteller with which the play opens:

-"Can you write?"

-"No, why?"

Then the arrival of Ganesha and the beginning of the story, everything unfolded before my eyes as if I were a member of the audience. It was quite extraordinary. I jotted everything down. The theatrical key had been found. It was based on a triangle—a storyteller, a god and a child—and on an uncertainty: which of the two, Ganesha or Krishna, had invented the other? The narrator and his

listener would see the characters acting out their lives before them, could touch them and speak to them. I had the keystone of my edifice. With relief, I fell asleep. The next morning I telephoned Peter and told him about it. "No need to look any further," he said, "you've got it."

Was it really all over?

Yes and no. The overall structure, the theatrical foundation, was in place. But there was so much left to do. I attended all the rehearsals, making a thousand and one corrections to meet the problems the actors encountered. Then, at every stage, when the performances started, when we made the English version, when we wrote the television series, when we went on to the film to which we were putting the finishing touches, there were many things to review. For example, it was only when writing the screenplay for the film that I found the solution to a problem I had been unable to resolve in the play. Today, if it had to be done over again, I would write it differently.

Has this tremendous experience left you with any specific ideas about or overall impressions of the **Mahabharata** *or of the epic form in general?*

Georges Dumézil thought that the *Mahabharata* was an adaptation in epic form of a fifth Veda (ancient Hindu scripture) which has been lost. I have neither his erudition nor his authority, but I have come to the same conclusion. While reading the *Mahabharata* and the Vedas, I could sense a link between them but also a difference. It is not easy to analyse; one has to try to feel these things, even when one doesn't altogether understand them.

The Vedas are ascribed to no author. They are revealed texts which simply proclaim the truth. All cultures have similar texts, written or oral, which proclaim the truth, which tell the people where they came from, what their place is on this earth and how they must live to maintain that place. When an author takes a hand, because he invents, because he creates, he deviates from the path of truth, introducing an untruth or an error, and in a sense becomes an exile from the community which sees itself reflected in that mythical truth.

Epic poems deviate cautiously from the revealed, mythical truth and even from legendary history. An epic is truly a creative work, the work of an author, even though it attempts to keep in contact with the myth. The *Mahabharata* is, indeed, the work of a creative writer. We can be sure of this, even though we may not know anything about the author, because from the beginning to the end of the poem, someone has, as it were, taken events in hand. At the end we find threads that can be traced back to the beginning. And the style of writing is the same. Written down and copied many times between the fourth century BC and the third century AD, this vast epic has, of course, been subjected to many alterations and additions. Nevertheless, one can sense that it is a single work written by a single author. Georges Dumézil was also of this opinion.

I think that this is an important point to make, because the introduction of the notion of an author brings with it a specifically human element. And this is the point at which we deviate from the path of revealed truth to enter the world of the epic. In a certain fashion, for better or for worse, an epic helps a society to become organized. It is the great common saga, drawing inspiration from the gods, but already talking about man. This is surely a vital stage in the founding of a society. Each of the characters in the *Mahabharata* has a divine alter ego at first. Little by little they forget that they are the children of gods; they begin to face up to the most trivial and mundane problems and, in so doing, they become mere humans. This, in a sense, is the function of the epic—to cut the cords that bind the leading actors to the heavenly world of the gods and set their feet firmly on the ground, to set them face to face with their problems as individuals and then as citizens. The law, and indeed laws, aided and reinforced by the prestige of poetry, have to be established. In the chaos of the human world, a lasting, coherent order has to be sought and given some apparent justification.

This seemed very clear to me from the *Mahabharata*, as it does from the *Iliad* and from the *Odyssey*. It was the guiding concept behind the writing of the play and its direction. At the beginning, Peter Brook's setting was light, ethereal and unreal, bathed in divine grace. Gradually it grew heavier, subject to the weight and gravity of life on earth, to end unambiguously in the mire. The earth, as a character, plays a progressively more important role. We see a society becoming organized and then rent as it cuts itself off from its celestial youth.

How do you feel after this experience?

In *The Conference of the Birds*, by the Persian poet Farid od-Din 'Attar, three butterflies discuss the nature of a candle. The first one approaches it to have a look and comes back saying: "It is light." The second butterfly goes closer, burns its wing and comes back saying: "It burns." The third butterfly goes even closer, flies into the flame and does not return. It has learned what it wanted to know, what it alone knows. But it cannot tell the others. This parable cannot be bettered. There is always a third and last circle to enter, and if you do so you can no longer talk about it. You know, but you cannot communicate what you know to anyone else.

So the theatre is merely the second circle?

I recently read a beautiful Persian poem which said: "Last night a voice whispered in my ear: 'No such thing exists as a voice that whispers in the ear at night'." ■

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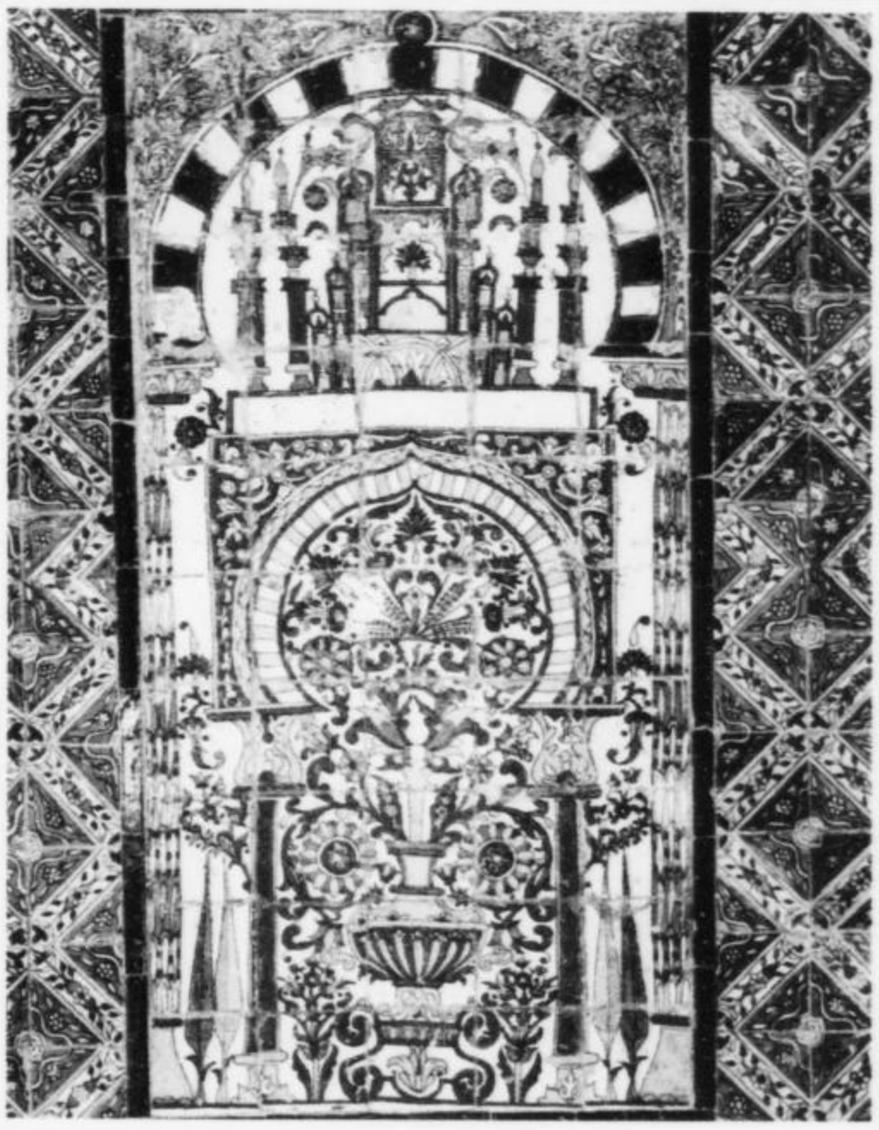

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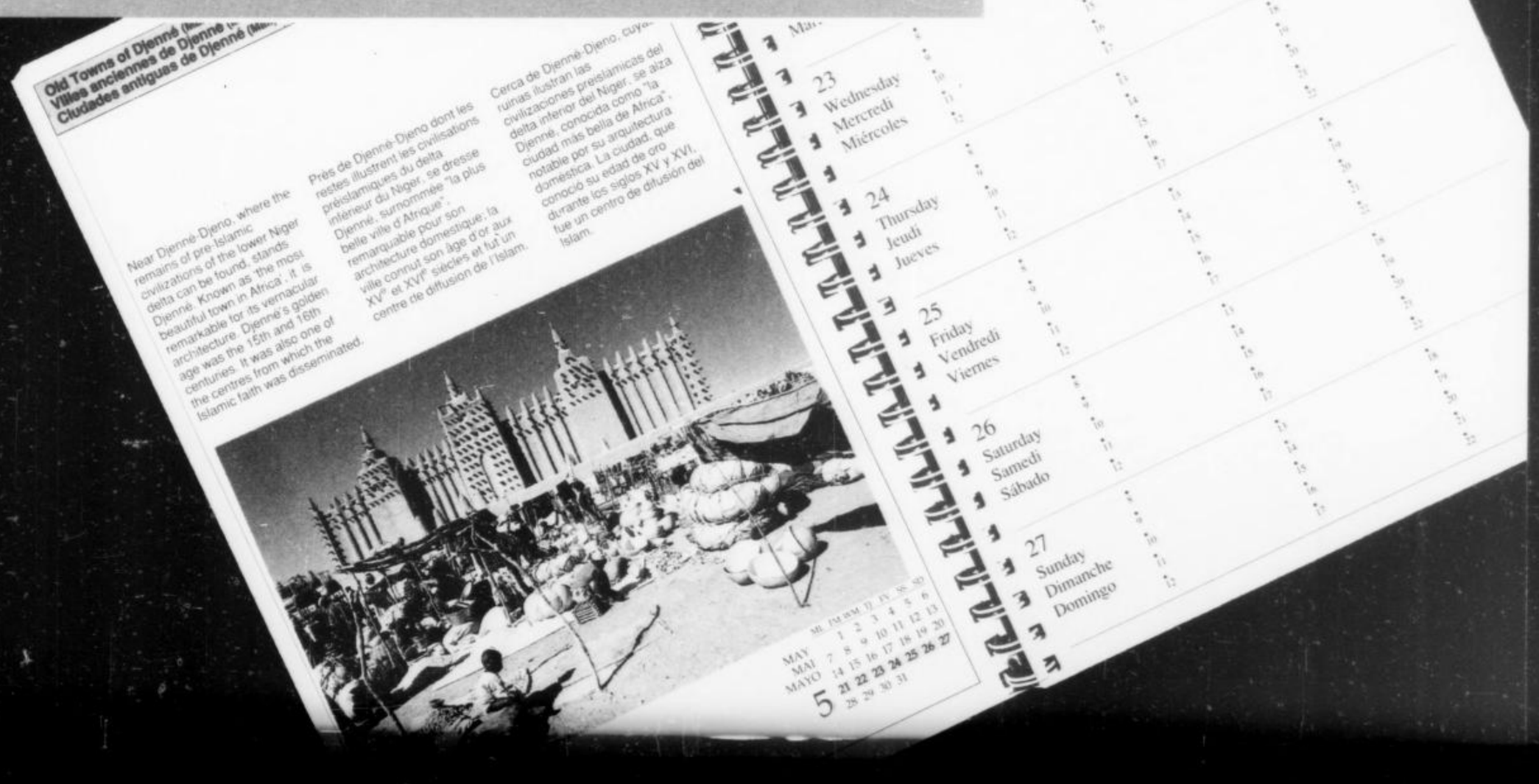

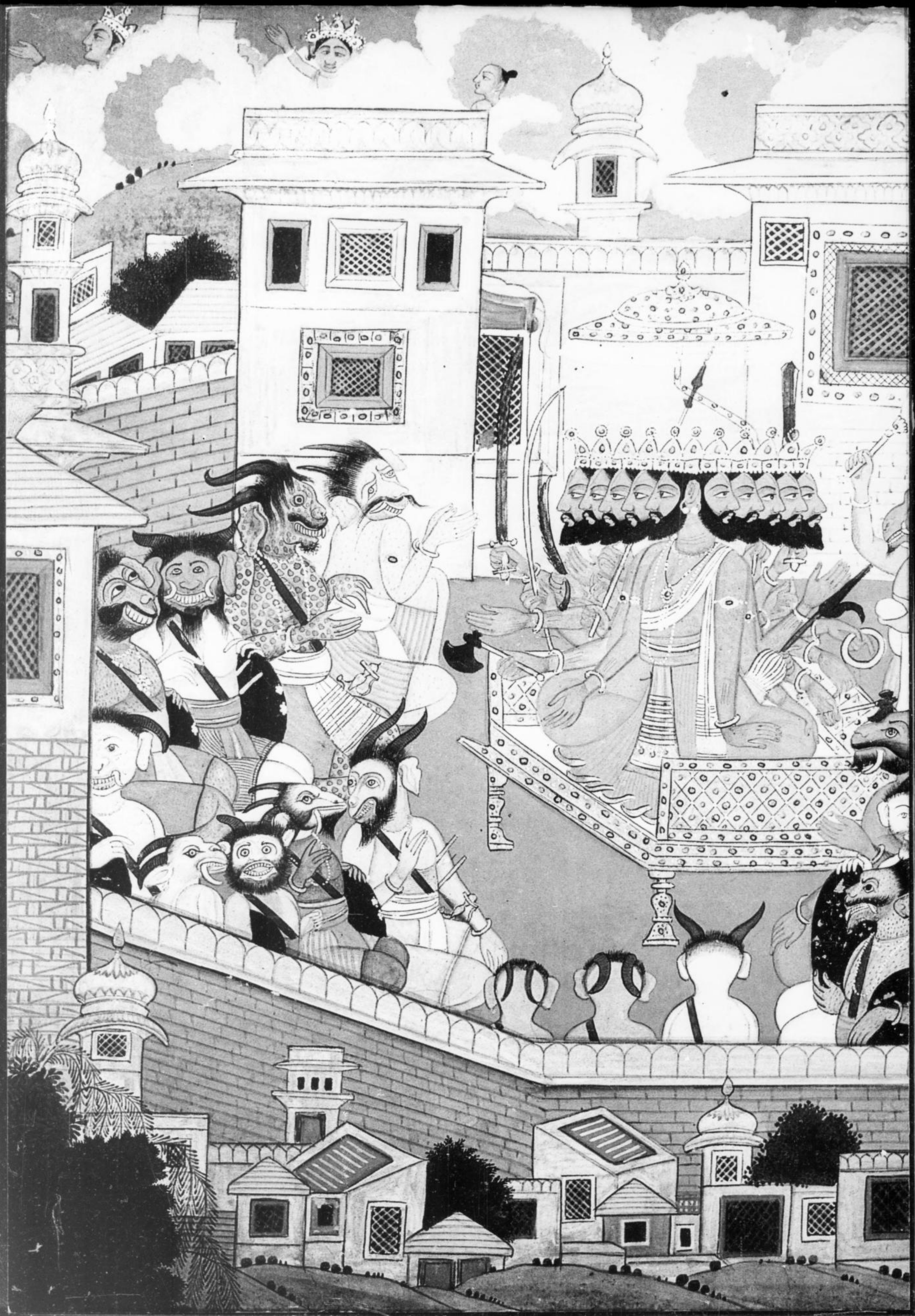

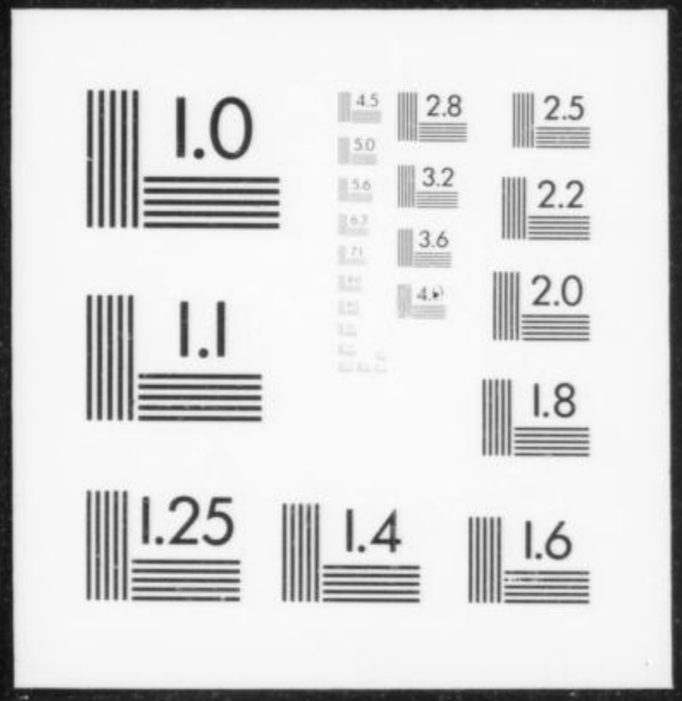
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